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THE BEAST



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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

A Fable

BY SARAH TYTLER

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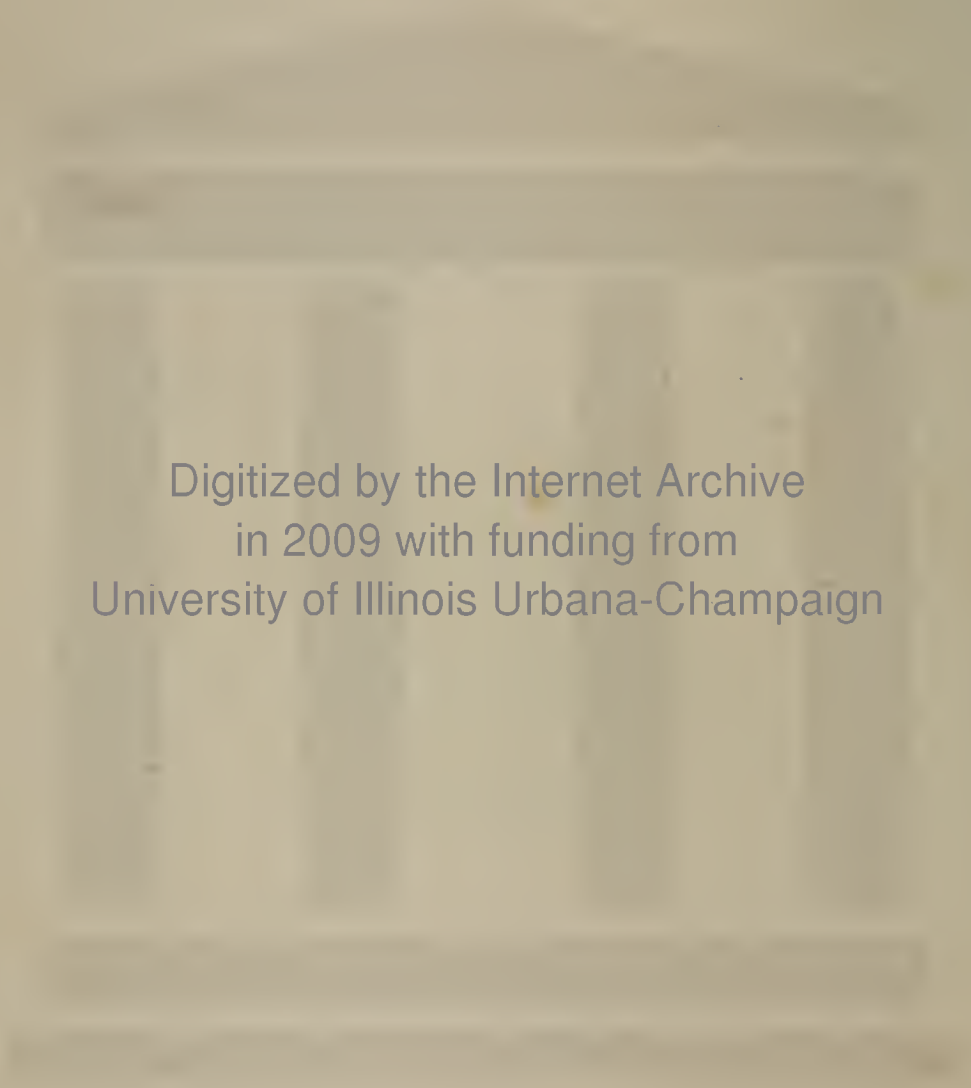
VOL. III.

LONDON

CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1884

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BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

REPARATION.

LADY FERMOR gave no token of missing the girl who had been her companion for the last twenty years. The old lady awoke and breakfasted, read the newspapers or got Soames to read them to her, took her stroll on the terrace, ate her luncheon, had her afternoon drive, her nap, her dinner, her evening game of *écarté* if Major Pollock dropped in, and, failing him, she condescended to a game at cribbage with Soames, retired to bed, and slept apparently without a care on her mind or a feather's weight on her conscience. She had always boasted that, though she was fond of company in her day,

she could suffice for herself, and it looked like it. To the few visitors who, remembering Lady Fermor's position in the county, her age and isolation, made a point of inquiring for her, she merely alluded to Iris's absence without stating its cause or term ; and when it was Lady Fermor's will to keep her own counsel, not many people would venture to dispute the point with her. Even Lucy, with the rest of the Acton family and Lady Thwaite, who were the most surprised and perplexed at the unexpected, unexplained, undefined visit somewhere, to somebody, which Iris was paying, submitted to be kept for a while in ignorance. Nobody had a right to intermeddle, nobody suspected even so formidable an old lady as Lady Fermor of making away with her grandchild—still there was something mysterious about the manner in which Iris Compton had vanished from her friends' ken, though they easily learnt that she had left openly, in broad day, in the Lambford carriage, and taken the afternoon train to London in the most prosaic matter-of-fact fashion. The mystery began to make itself felt, so that within a fortnight of the event Lady Fermor's tranquillity was

disturbed, and she was assailed and called to account in her own house, which ought to have been her castle.

Lady Fermor had returned from her afternoon drive, and gone into her drawing-room for half an hour, when a message was brought to her from a former friend—a man who had forgotten the habit of sending in a card almost as soon as he had acquired it, who had arrived at the frame of mind when forms and ceremonies were indifferent to him. If he remembered them, good and well; why not comply with them if they were a matter of use and wont, and of satisfaction to anybody? If he forgot them, good and well also; what did they signify after all to any creature with a reasonable judgment and a soul to be saved? Sir William Thwaite could bid a servant tell Lady Fermor that he wished to see her, and he forgot himself to such a degree that it was exactly what he said. He had not the suavity to add, ‘By her ladyship’s leave,’ or ‘If the call is convenient for her,’ notwithstanding he had long ceased to be a daily visitor at Lambford. He had not been there since the night of Miss Compton’s ball. He had not spoken to Lady Fermor since she

left him in a rage, in the teeth of a thunder-storm after her last visit to Whitehills. He had been a husband and a widower in the interval.

As the message was delivered to the venerable woman, her sunken eyes gave a warlike flash, and she managed to sit erect after she had snapped out the two words, 'Admit him.' When it came to that, strife, and not peace, was her natural element. In spite of her years, a tough encounter, a rousing contention, a battle of words were more acceptable to her than sluggish rest.

Sir William came to his former haunt, looking too stern to be lightly discomposed and discomfited. He gave a hurried glance round while he was mechanically saying 'Good-morning' to his former ally, and hoping he saw her well; and the sternness was intensified on a face which, when it was not lit up with a smile, had always been more the type of a certain form of comely strength than of physiognomical sunshine and sweetness.

'It is a treat to see you nowadays, Sir William,' said Lady Fermor tentatively, motioning him to a seat beside her.

But he did not sit down, and he did not

answer her, save by telling his errand with brutal straightforwardness. 'Where is Miss Compton, Lady Fermor?'

'Why do you ask?' she parried his question with the utmost coolness and intrepidity, while her eyes twinkled maliciously.

'Because I am determined to know,' he answered after an instant's pause.

'And by what right do you claim to be made acquainted with my grand-daughter's whereabouts?' she repeated her counter-challenge. 'Really, Sir William, you were always an original, and at one time, I believe, I rather liked your originality; but that time is past, and there are limits even to good things.'

Her sarcasm did not ruffle his mood. He had ceased to wince at the prick of such weapons; and he was able to proclaim a right which in his eyes was all-sufficient to authorize his presence and interrogation, 'You were willing to give her and her happiness into my keeping once. Is not that enough to entitle me to ask what has come to her?'

'Very little has come to her, as you say, that I know of,' answered Lady Fermor with

an insolent criticism of his English, and with exasperating nonchalance. ‘If she had many rejected lovers it would be an awkward precedent to establish that each man might come and bore me with his curiosity to hear the last news of his old flame. But she was not much of a belle, poor thing!—and, to tell the truth, I do not know that she had the glory of dismissing any suitor, save one; therefore, I do not mind saying to you that I know nothing about her.’

‘It ain’t possible,’ he cried hotly; ‘she was in your care. Women of your class don’t let girls go out into the world on their own hook, to do what they like, without having somebody to look after them. Your notion is, that girls cannot take care of themselves no more than if they were babies.’

‘And I dare say we are right,’ she interjected briskly.

‘And you make and keep them helpless,’ he went on without appearing to pay any attention to her, ‘till they are too delicate and dainty to stand on their own feet and make their own way. I know she isn’t like that, and I haven’t such a bad opinion of the world as to think that there are many, either

gentle or simple, that would harm her. But it ain't kind or considerate that she should be exposed to what another young lady could not face ; and, though she may not be right-down harmed, she may be frightened and worried. Lady Fermor, I insist on your giving me satisfaction.'

'In my day it was gentlemen who gave each other satisfaction,' said Lady Fermor airily ; 'a good manly custom which, like some other customs not half so bad as they were called, has passed away ; but let them go—they served my time. I assure you, Sir William, I am not accountable for the young lady in whom you are pleased to take so deep an interest. I am sorry not to have it in my power to say she returns it, or would thank you for it,' with a little mocking, palsied bow to her listener. 'She took our relations, hers and mine, into her own hands. According to your definition, she assumed the privilege of the lower orders. She said it was better we should part ; she could not stay any longer with me. I am too old a woman to pretend to fight with disobedient, undutiful girls or boys either, even though they are my grandchildren. She said she would go, and

she went—there is the long and the short of it.’

‘Before it came to that, my lady, you had something to answer for,’ said Sir William, gulping down what was sticking in his throat.

‘Now, don’t you think this is getting tiresome?’ suggested Lady Fermor. ‘I have told you the truth, which, whatever you may believe, you have no earthly call to swagger here and demand from me. May I beg you to spare me your reflections on it, and to cut short your visit? Don’t you see, man, I have come in from a drive, and am tired?’

‘I cannot help it,’ he protested, but in the middle of the rudeness he pushed a foot-stool under her feet, and caught up a cushion to place at her back. Remembering former services of the same kind, rendered under different circumstances and highly valued then, the wicked old face twitched and softened a little, though it relapsed the next moment into its malice and hardness.

‘You don’t mean to say you let her go like that?’ he persisted, still standing like an avenging giant before a hard-hearted witch. ‘You never asked her where she was to turn

to? You are not acquainted with any friend she might seek?

‘No,’ she had the coarseness and cruelty to answer him; ‘it is not always advisable to ask too many questions. We women are not often without friends at Iris’s age; and we don’t always care to publish the road we mean to follow. It is a pleasant enough road at starting, whatever you men may make of it in the end.’

‘It is a shameful lie!’ he said, speaking his mind without the slightest reservation, while his fresh-coloured face darkened to a dusky red, and the veins on his forehead, within the curves of chestnut hair, stood out knotted like whipcord. ‘By George, if you were a man, though you were a prince, I would not stand to hear it. You are an old woman and my lady; but I say you have spoken an infamous slander against your own flesh and blood, as much above you as heaven is above earth. Where is your natural womanly feeling, your mother’s heart, Lady Fermor? I was a fool to come near you, unless to speak a bit of my mind, and denounce you in the place where you befooled me.’

Something in his air and attitude smote the rock of her nature on which his words had struck in vain. She shrank and cowered a little, and collapsed into the feebleness of her years.

‘Don’t,’ she implored, ‘don’t you curse me ; you are like—like a friend I had once. Never mind who it was. I saw the likeness the first day we met, and took a fancy for you, and did my best to serve you. I don’t deserve this treatment from you, Thwaite, but I am ready to give you satisfaction—all the satisfaction I can. That goose of a girl you think so much of, though she don’t care a straw for you, and she ain’t worth your trouble—well, let that be—she never told me where she was going, and I am not bound to know ; but she is no more fit to carry out a plot than that Spanish ass, Don Quixote. She behaved like a simpleton, as you may be sure. Her baggage was addressed to the care of a sister of a canting mischief-making governess the child once had, and her ticket was taken to London. She had money for her board for three months. I can give you the address if you care to have it, though I don’t see what good it will do

you now. Sir William, will you go and leave me alone in peace, and don't come back to haunt me in another person's guise on my dying bed.'

'No, I want to do something better than that,' he said, half with lingering fury, half in gruff relenting and concession to their old friendly relations. 'You say you took a fancy for me, and meant well by me. I am willing to believe you, though it was a fancy which played me strange tricks, and went far to my undoing. I was not ungrateful, whatever you may think. I take it you have not so many true friends to call your own at the close of your long life that you should shake off this one and that one—your granddaughter, as good as gold, or even a rough, little-worth fellow like me. Why in the name of goodness should you not go after Miss Compton, find her, and be a loving grandmother to her, as I am sure she would be a loving child to you, if you would let her?'

'Because it ain't in me, Thwaite,' replied her ladyship, with returning coolness and candour. 'You must be a bad reader of character, if you cannot decipher that.'

“Loving grandmother,” indeed ! Bah ! I leave that to your tame old body who has kissed her faithless tyrant’s feet, and run after her prodigal sons and fast daughters, until in the evening of her days she is content to sit chirping and snivelling over her mischievous brats of grandchildren.’

He was not to be diverted from his aim.

‘You say Miss Compton has the payment of her board, among people you disapprove of, for a month or two. What is she to do then ? What is she to think now as to what is to become of her afterwards ? Will you let her feel herself forsaken by man ?—not by God. You cannot touch her there.’ He broke off in a low tone with a mixture of reverence and tenderness—the true chivalrous devotion, very different from any species of love poor Lady Fermor had ever given or taken, shining in his blue eyes. ‘You do not intend Lord Fermor’s grand-daughter to beg her board from strangers, or to hire herself out for a wage, do you ? though she might count it no dishonour to make service honourable by discharging it.’

‘She has chosen her course, and she must abide by it, ay, and eat the fruit of her

folly,' argued the old woman, before she changed her cue, and suddenly made a concession. 'If I do anything more for Iris Compton, it will be as a favour to you, Thwaite. The hussy—or the angel, if you prefer it—shall owe my forgiveness to you. That will be something for her pride to swallow, though I fear you have lost the spirit to cast it in her teeth.'

Powerful as Sir William's championship had been, this was not exactly true. It was a fact that Lady Fermor, like most women of strong passions, had possessed little natural affection. The passions had burnt themselves out, but in their ashes there were few elements for the growth of the domestic charities. Still, there were bounds to her callousness and vindictiveness. Stoically as she had borne herself, it was impossible for her not to have experienced twinges of compunction for the grand-daughter of Lord Fermor, the wrinkled, tottering woman's lover in the days of her prime, who had wedded her dishonour, and crowned her with all the gifts of fortune he could bestow to the last. Lady Fermor had driven this girl, as Sir William had put it, from the

dignity and ease of Lambford, to beg her bread or to hire herself out for a wage. In the end the old woman might not be unwilling, for more reasons than one, to yield to his advocacy, giving it all the credit in order to save her own consistency ; while underneath the veil she appeased her grizzly ghost of a conscience, and retained the rags of reputation she had recovered in the world.

‘Thanks,’ he said shortly ; and then, fearing to displease her, and turn her from her cautious admission, he forced himself to protest, ‘I’ll stand no end indebted to you if you do this kindness to yourself and Miss Compton at my bidding. But what you mean to do, you ought to set about quickly.’ He betrayed his doubt and anxiety in his last hesitating words.

‘You are in a great hurry, Thwaite,’ observed Lady Fermor sarcastically. ‘I suppose you see I have my bonnet on my head, and you think I shall be ready to stir my old bones and rise and run after a flighty fool of twenty or thereabouts. Much obliged for your consideration for my age and infirmities. You had better order the carriage

back at once, and ride on before, and get a ticket for London, and let me start napless and dinnerless. I should arrive dizzy and starving before midnight. I dare say I might knock about for a bed, or if I found my way to Fitzroy Square, perhaps my good grand-daughter would have the common humanity to lend me hers for what remained of the night.'

'You are talking nonsense,' he said bluntly, staring at her, 'but you will go up to London, and seek out Miss Compton—won't you?'

'I may, if you will be my escort. I have never been accustomed to travel without a squire,' she said with a kind of ghastly coquetry. 'When I was younger, a good deal younger, I used to have half-a-dozen sparks and beaux at my disposal. As it is, I am not so strong and nimble as Iris Compton. By-the-bye, I'm not at all sure that she will give in, and consent to put herself under my wing again. Disobedience is a virulent as well as a common complaint nowadays. I shall need all the foreign support I can get. Yours may not be very available in this case, but it is better than

none. To be sure, my young lady may have eaten her leek and changed her mind, while another person has had time and reason enough to alter his opinion. I shan't blame him, though I am reduced to wonder whether he has attacked me out of a spirit of contradiction and devilry, or from mere mawkish magnanimity, pity, and such-like stuff.'

She looked at him sharply. He returned her glance coldly, and dismissed her wonder with a formal 'Good-afternoon, Lady Fermor. I shall see you to London if you like, at whatever time you fix upon,' as he left her.

That night Bill Rogers was considerably impressed by finding himself put in authority at Whitehills, while his master held himself in readiness to start any day for London.

CHAPTER XXIX.

YOUTH STRIVES.

IRIS had reached London in safety ; she had found Mrs. Haigh, a fat, florid, overdressed woman, not inhospitable, not unfriendly—far from it. But Iris had not found another Miss Burrage—it would have been unreasonable to expect it in the matron who was in an extraordinary flutter of mingled pride and alarm at having Lord and Lady Fermor's grand-daughter again under Mrs. Haigh's roof. Iris's presence lent a glorious distinction to the upper middle-class boarding-house, but it might be drawing down upon the hostess the wrath of 'the combined aristocracy'—and the combined aristocracy must be an awful power indeed—because of Mrs. Haigh's aiding and abetting insubordination in their ranks and desertion from their leaders.

Iris had said honestly : ‘ I am sorry to say grandmamma and I have not been happy together lately, Mrs. Haigh. Perhaps my dear old friend, Miss Burrage, may have said something long ago, which will help you to understand matters. I don’t mean that I am not to blame. No doubt I have failed in tact and patience, and a thousand things, but the painful fact remains that we have not got on well together. Now I have left Lambford with Lady Fermor’s knowledge, and come up to town to ask if you will take me in, till I see what is to become of me.’

Of course Mrs. Haigh would take Iris in. What mistress of a boarding establishment, unless she were a very exceptional person, would refuse to receive a peer’s grand-daughter, looking as Iris looked, wearing the dress she wore, even if there had not been the old family connection of which Mrs. Haigh had boasted for the last fifteen years ?

Mrs. Haigh was soon satisfied that Iris, though she as good as announced that she had quarrelled with her grandmother, was neither impecunious in the meantime, nor possessed by any romantic delusion of throwing herself on the devotion of ancient

allies, and living on air, her dignity, and their worshipping commiseration. When this important little item was agreeably settled to Mrs. Haigh's practical mind, she had nothing to disturb her but the apprehension of Lady Fermor's displeasure, and that vague horror of the wrath of the combined aristocracy which was not without its breathless charm, like the coveted terror produced by an exciting ghost story. Certainly Mrs. Haigh was aware that Lady Fermor had been a very formidable, unmanageable person, though she ought by this time to be in her dotage. But whether doting or not, surely she would rather have her grand-daughter in Fitzroy Square, with highly respectable people of whom her ladyship knew something, than wandering through the world without chaperon or companion—a deplorably compromising style which was not to be thought of for a moment, which Mrs. Haigh would never have listened to where her own daughter Juju was concerned. Lady Fermor ought rather to feel relieved and grateful when she heard Mrs. Haigh's name mentioned in the light of a temporary guardian for Miss Compton.

Having persuaded herself of this qualification to Lady Fermor's displeasure, Mrs. Haigh was at liberty to rejoice in the acquisition to her circle, even though her reason whispered it could not be permanent. Its reflected *éclat* might long survive its actual existence, and while it lasted the mistress of the house could load Iris with overpowering attentions. She—Mrs. Haigh—could insist on Miss Compton's taking precedence of the other lady-lodgers, who, to do them justice, evinced no radical or communistic principles on this point, but were more than willing to give way to Iris if she would but shed upon them a share of the light of her aristocratic countenance.

Her false position hurt Iris, though she did not attribute it wholly to snobbishness and vulgarity. She knew there was a subtle attraction in rank, and though she both laughed and winced at the application of the attraction to herself, in her present circumstances, she was honest enough to own that she too would have deferred to a duchess, especially if she had been of the blood royal, and that a similar homage might only be different in degree. But a duchess without

a home, a duchess who was anxiously meditating how she might earn her bread, had better not have the trappings of her original estate brandished before her ; she ought to keep them in the background as much as possible, and take up her position on a common level.

Iris was vexed that Mrs. Haigh would constantly speak of her and to her as 'Lady Fermor's grand-daughter.' The excellent woman would even betray at once her ignorance and vanity, by bestowing on Iris a handle to her name to which she was not entitled. Mrs. Haigh always called Iris the Honourable Miss Compton, and considered it foolish modesty and shyness—perhaps a little hauteur in disguise—when the girl first hinted, and then said plainly, that neither the Herald's Office nor Debrett would authorize the use of such a privilege.

Iris was still more wounded when she had reason to suspect that Mrs. Haigh, in her incessant reference to Lambford and Lady Fermor, did not refrain from imparting in mysterious whispers, to chosen members of her circle, the scandals with which [the name had been associated, or else, by nods and

shrugs and hinted innuendoes, refreshed her ladies' and gentlemen's memories on the subject. She was irreproachable in her own morals, yet she seemed to take a warped pride in what she was pleased to view as aristocratic iniquities.

These ladies and gentlemen were perfectly respectable, better-class *pensionnaires*. Though the ladies had the priority by courteous phrase, the gentlemen were really the ruling power in the establishment, as they still are in the world. Whether married or single, from the bachelor confidential clerk in a tremendously great banking establishment, to the retired clergyman and half-pay officers, they all paid board in full; and as they were the members of the establishment who were the most out of the house at their offices and clubs during the day, the gentlemen were supposed to give the least trouble to their hostess.

But the supposition was in a great measure a delusion. It was for the gentlemen's appetite and tastes that Mrs. Haigh catered most sedulously; it was the gentlemen's evening rubber that she guarded from interruption most carefully. Wives sometimes saved her

the trouble of ascertaining their husbands' inclinations, and providing for the men's recreations, by proving beyond mistake that the women were the better horses in the matrimonial traces—were it only in the confident assertion of their inclinations and of their amusements as the first to be considered by their submissive husbands, and, after them, by the rest of creation. But in that case there was merely a reversal of relations, and these potent wives filled their husbands' shoes and represented the men in the boarding-house. The other women—especially the single women—did not fare the better for the exceptions to the supremacy of the men, and to the natural deference shown them by the women.

Some of the spinsters were ladies in reduced circumstances, and paid Mrs. Haigh a smaller board for rooms nearer the sky, and for inferior attendance generally, with which, in strict justice and logic, these half-indigent gentlewomen ought to have been contented. But the fact was they employed a considerable amount of their time either in jealous inspection of the better position of their neighbours, and muttered grumbling over

their own wants, or in high-faluting, ostentatious professions of indifference to circumstances, or else in judicious, assiduous attentions to their better-off companions—attentions which had their reward.

To the single ladies, more than all the other inhabitants of the house, Iris's advent was a windfall. For once the spinsters felt equal to the men and to the married women, who, by force of character or temper, were as good as the men, or who merely held on by the skirts of their individual partners. The other maidens, however ancient, shared in the fuss made about a girl, in the special consideration lavished on her—with much of which she would willingly have dispensed—as if it had been a tribute to the whole body of unprotected females.

In return for the homage paid to her—or rather to Lady Fermor's grand-daughter—Iris made figuratively a series of courteous bows, and sought to possess her soul in patience like a princess on a royal progress. But, although in her faith, hope, and charity—which, after all the sneers liberally launched at these graces and their Christian origin, are as trustworthy touchstones as any that have

yet been found for use in the motley crowd of life---Iris had no doubt that there was more than sufficient to respect, like, and inspire interest in her fellow-boarders, if one only knew them better, and held the clue to the true life beneath the conventional; still, looking only on the surface, she did not find material which attracted her particularly in any of the members of the large family under Mrs. Haigh's roof.

Iris was not absorbed, to the withdrawal of her mind from her personal affairs, in the rich, stiffened, silent, white-haired clerk of so great a banking-house, that even its first clerk was surrounded by a nimbus of golden influence and responsibility.

She did not yield to the lively fascinations of Captain Boscawen, who knew all the gossip of the best society, and being affable, gallant, and chatty, was a favourite with most of the ladies. She was not even greatly touched by the Rev. Edward Calcott, a younger man than the first two heroes. He had been forced to retire from his vicar's charge on account of an abiding relaxed throat and weak chest, and was, therefore, as a clergyman and a confirmed invalid, invested

with the double attributes of a spiritual director and an object of tender sympathy to every soft heart. Iris was sorry for him, but her heart was not so soft in this quarter as to prevent her perceiving that he was both self-conscious and self-indulgent; so she left the nursing of him to his wife, and kept her spiritual concerns out of his reach.

Iris was not more won by the ladies—from bluff Mrs. Judge Penfold, who, arguing from her title, had appropriated her husband's office as well as the reins of his phaeton—wherever the colonial law authority; himself, bridled and saddled, was driven metaphorically—down to little Mrs. Rugely.

The last was an inconsolable pretty young widow, who, to the envy of the remaining men, sat bereft at the Rev. Edward's feet; yet she was able to take the deepest interest in the exact fit of her widow's gown and the becoming shape of her bonnet, and pensively asked her friends' advice whether scarlet flowers were not admissible after the first stage of mourning was past? Her lost love had always liked her with scarlet, and entire black was really too trying for a brunette complexion.

Iris had received a blow in finding Mrs. Haigh so unlike Miss Burrage, and the blow was not softened, neither was the likeness increased, on the only occasion when the girl spoke of her best friend to that friend's sister.

Mrs. Haigh twinkled away a facile tear, indeed, and expressed her thankfulness for having had her dear Emily in Mrs. Haigh's house, to be waited upon by her during the good soul's last illness.

'It was a great privilege, Miss Compton; you who knew her, and who, I may say, was her pet pupil, can guess how uncomplaining, considerate, even cheerful, she was to the very last.'

But Mrs. Haigh was honest in her thick-skinnedness, and absence of deep or delicate or abiding feelings. She added, innocently enough, in the next breath :

'It was a mercy the illness was short, for it saved the dear saint a great deal of suffering; and to have had her lying long here, or even lingering on, neither ill nor well, unfit for duty, without a sufficient provision for her needs, a burden to herself and others—as, between ourselves, I think Mr. Calcott is

sometimes, when he murmurs so at his chimney smoking, and objects to the piano being played after certain hours—would have been more than I could have undertaken, with my husband and children and the care of a boarding-house on my hands. When one comes to think of it all,' reflected Mrs. Haigh with a species of complacency, 'darling Emily was not suited for this world. She was an excellent creature, but she was painfully plain from a girl. She had ability and accomplishments; but she had no manners that I could see—though, of course, we know she lived in the best society—no "go" or dash. She could not relish what most people enjoy. To dress what I call well became a bore to her. She was not fond of shopping or calling or dining out, and hardly cared for a box or a stall at the opera or the theatre, unless the play or the opera, as well as the singers and actors, chanced to be exceptional. She pottered about more than she was able among humdrum, fallen-down people she had known long ago, or sick or poor people. She had a regard for out-of-the-way churches and eccentric clergymen that few people save herself had heard of or cared for. Put her

down with a book she liked and her work, and the world held little more attraction for her. No, poor dear Emily was not a woman for this world. She was a woman to be overlooked and slighted—which she did not mind, for she had rather a lack of spirit and proper pride. She was apt to be smiled at, for she had her little peculiarities, dear soul! though she was my sister—and jostled against and trampled upon, as the world goes. I trust she is far better off where she has gone, poor love!

‘She was a woman of whom the world was not worthy, Mrs. Haigh,’ said Iris hotly.

To compare Miss Burrage to Mr. Calcott! To have been capable of thinking of her as a possible burden, and so finding her premature death in one light a boon, instead of wrestling with God that the loved presence might be spared for a season, and yearning to keep it here so long as life lingered in the feeble frame, and sense and love on the peaceful, wasted brow and lips! There might have been a kind of selfishness in the struggle, and the anguish, and the contest for another with the last foe, in the dumb

despair and hopeless rebellion, which only God could change into resignation; but it was the involuntary, inevitable protest against the separation which, though it be but for a time, is, next to sin, the sting of death and the mortal terror and great tribulation of true love.

What would not Iris have given to have seen her old friend's dear face again, though it had come but in a vision of the night—to have heard her wise, gentle counsel, though it had been only in a dream!

Iris was not disappointed in Mr. Haigh as she was in Mrs. Haigh. He was only Miss Burrage's brother-in-law, by Mrs. Haigh's election, not a member of Miss Burrage's family, of the same father and mother, and of kindred blood. Besides, Iris had retained a dim recollection of him—more correct in all respects than her early vision of his wife as a lively, handsome young matron, who had petted her and been very affectionate to Miss Burrage. Mrs. Haigh was still animated and motherly in hostess fashion, good-looking in a full-blown style, effusive in caressing terms and in hugs where she was intimate

enough and could take the liberty to bestow them.

But unfortunately, Iris had learnt to know that very little lay behind these signs save what, after all, they might have been fairly taken to indicate by more experienced persons—a creditable, energetic effort to obtain for herself and her family that independence and comfort which Mr. Haigh alone could not ensure to them, natural affection for her offspring, and a considerable fund of careless good-humour.

Mr. Haigh was the cipher that Iris had always remembered him. He sat at the foot of the table and did the principal carving. He kept the gentlemen company when the ladies had retired. He was safe for a partner at whist, unless somebody else wished to make up the party. He could serve as a tolerable second when the boarders happened to be musical and a second was in request. He dabbled a little in art, so as to have the *entrée* to a few studios, and afford the benefit of his opinion to any amateur artist in the house. He had the same intangible connection with the theatres and opera-houses, so that he could always procure tickets, boxes

and stalls, and predict what a play would turn out, when the mass of the public was helpless and voiceless. Mr. Haigh had been educated abroad, and possessed an additional advantage, of which he was rather vain. He was tolerably conversant with several European languages. He could serve on a pinch as an amateur courier by anticipation to inexperienced projectors of continental tours.

To all these positive advantages, he added the strong negative recommendation that he was without expensive vices. He might be said to earn his pocket-money, with the leisure from all employment save that of obliging and entertaining his boarders—a duty to which he was rather partial.

In any other position, Mr. Haigh might have been a purely ornamental member of society; but as the spouse of a lady who kept an upper-class boarding-house, he was almost the right man in the right place—while Iris had never imagined she would get anything more than a host's gentlemanlike notice from Mr. Haigh.

But Mrs. Haigh had children, who were also Miss Burrage's nephews and nieces. They were all at school save one, Juliana,

or Ju-ju, the eldest daughter, a girl of nineteen, to whom Iris turned eagerly. But, alas! Ju-ju was more like her well-bred lymphatic father than her mother—far less her aunt. Ju-ju's chief end in life seemed to be to comply with all the obligations of the most finished young ladyhood in the fashion of the day, under such difficulties as limited means and the necessity for the family's keeping boarders implied. Ju-ju took her stand on her father and mother's claims to gentility as educated people, the children of a clergyman of the Church of England on the one hand, and a captain in the army on the other. She ignored the items that Mrs. Haigh had been a governess like her sister, and that Mr. Haigh had failed in succession as a barrister, an operatic singer, an artist, and a playwright. Ju-ju was inclined to make out that her father and mother kept a boarding-house for their private pleasure. She did nothing save sit embroidering the artistic, elaborate embroidery of the hour, and attend to her toilet in the minutest details of the rosette on her French shoe, and the extra button on her profusely buttoned glove.

She was neither pretty nor plain, though

she had a good figure, and felt the more persuaded on that account that dress was of the first consequence to her. She had her own visiting set picked out from the sets of various boarders who had taken her into company with them. Mrs. Rugely and Mrs. Judge Penfold usually chaperoned her instead of her busy mother.

Iris Compton contemplated Ju-ju from a puzzled mental and moral distance, with the puzzle deepened by the fact that the girl was Miss Burrage's niece. How could personal enjoyment and the idlest trifles engross her wholly? What was she thinking of when she sat calmly applying herself for so many hours to this costly fancy-work, while her mother, behind backs, was really cumbered with the care of her servants, the burden of housekeeping for a large, disconnected, troublesome family, the worry of account-books which frequently refused to 'square'? And what became of all the splendid and delicate embroidery, of which only a few finished specimens appeared in the shape of table-covers and cushions in the drawing-room? Did Ju-ju simply work it to train and gratify her hand and eye, and then wan-

tonly destroy it, or did she bestow it as presents on all her absent friends ?

Iris found out the enigma at the same time that she hit upon a little opening for her own unprovided-for future, which was beginning to weigh heavily upon her mind.

In vain had Iris asked Mrs. Haigh's advice about what she ought to do to earn a little money. Mrs. Haigh was convinced that Iris's illustrious relations would not permit such an indignity. Miss Compton would only require to hint to them that her coffers were becoming empty, to have them filled again to overflowing.

Mrs. Haigh was not sure but that the law could compel a suitable provision, for she had read of peers' heirs who went to law to drag a maintenance from their stingy fathers, and she did not see why peeress's heiresses might not do the same. If it were not so, an aristocrat-adoring country would be enchanted to support Iris without compulsion.

In vain Iris frankly approached the subject with some of the other ladies—counting on them as a sort of informal women's friendly society. She was always stopped by their smiling and pooh-poohing her. They would

not have their peer's grand-daughter pulled down from her pedestal, or else they regarded her prospects with regard to working for her bread as so hopeless, that they preferred not to discuss them with her. In fact they told her it was lowering herself by hinting at such an alternative, almost as much as if she were to propose to borrow money from them.

At the same time Iris found to her dismay that life in a Fitzroy Square boarding-house, apart from the board, was a great deal dearer than life at Lambford. Everybody overdressed, punctiliously, with studied variety, for dinner. In the light of Mrs. Judge Penfold's brocade and diamonds the one day and velvet and pearls the next; Mrs. Rugely's diaphanous black and jet, or gold; and Ju-ju Haigh's earnestly thought out, subtle harmonies in strange, wonderful stuffs and tints from art-shops, her beads from Venice, her bangles from India, her amber and filigree-work from Damascus—all bought in London town, for Ju-ju had been no traveller—Iris was more than outshone. In such a white India muslin, with turquoise ornaments, as had dazzled Sir William Thwaite, or in such a blue silk, festooned with hops, as would have been

voted decidedly 'swellish' by the Hollises at Thornbrake, and pronounced perfectly exquisite by the Actons at the Rectory, she knew she looked shabbily, stalely monotonous in costume. She was like the poorest of the poor lady-boarders in their black silks or black grenadines, with a couple of boddices to wear alternately, and further changes wrought in the owners' imaginations by one set of ribands and flowers in the room of another. Mrs. Haigh, while she overlooked the delinquencies of the gentle paupers, would glance reproachfully at Iris. The Honourable Miss Compton might do many things as she chose, but she ought to comply with the rules of the house in dressing according to her rank.

The days had long gone by since ladies felt well equipped with a couple of evening dresses, by which they were as well known as by their features and complexions—the last were tolerably permanent in the early ages. The only question then was, as in the case of Petrarch's Laura, whether the fair one should appear in her green with violets, or in her purple with grey feathers.

Iris had the impression that she was play-

ing at being a grand demoiselle in an effeminate, luxurious, extravagant court. She tried to resist, but she was a young woman without a home, and had to yield something to what Mrs. Haigh called 'the rules of the house.' She was forced, like the poor ladies, since she had not the endless resources of Ju-ju, to waste a great deal of time in contriving small transparent devices for her dress to pass muster among the elaborate shifting toilets of the company.

It was on an errand to procure some not too costly, gauzy transformation, that Iris, who had from the first claimed the liberty of walking out by herself without becoming a mutual drag and fetter either on Mrs. Haigh or Ju-ju, visited such a monster shop of all wares as is a remarkable feature of the London of to-day. It was a little of an enterprise even for so fearless a girl as Iris to enter one of the many doors, fall into a stream of purchasers, pass down the streets of counters, and be bewildered by the different departments of the business, in story after story of the blocks of buildings. She could imagine herself in a huge prosaic set of bazaars, where the babel of tongues all pur-

ported to be one language, and the transmission of her insignificant self from point to point, by detachments of the army of men in clergymen and butler-like black coats and white-chokers, or by phalanxes of girls in endless black gowns and frizzled hair—professed to be means to an end.

Iris felt so small and so swallowed up, that she uttered a little cry of pleasure when she discovered Ju-ju Haigh at a counter on which the exquisite materials for some of her embroidery were displayed.

Ju-ju could not be said to return the compliment by sharing in the gratification. She reddened, and had a constrained air, while the girls exchanged half-a-dozen words. Iris would have passed on, but the crush of buyers and sellers was great here, and she could not advance many steps before one of the elder shopwomen, or ladies of the establishment as they prefer to be called, came to Miss Haigh and delivered a courteous verbal message :

‘ If the piece be done by next week, madam ’ (old-fashioned modes of address have acquired fresh life and new associations in connection with London shops), ‘ Mrs. Cree

says it will be in time enough for the Countess.'

Ju-ju met Iris's surprised eyes, and immediately turned aside, crimsoning from brow to throat, through the pearl-powder which she and young Mrs. Rugely and elderly Mrs. Judge Penfold and Mrs. Haigh, and poor Miss Swan, the poorest of the poor ladies, did not hesitate to use, though they stopped short as yet of rouge.

But Ju-ju showed no further inclination to be left alone; on the contrary, she hurried over her business, offered to join Iris and help her, with Ju-ju's valuable aid, in a purchase, and seemed even anxiously desirous of bearing Miss Compton company in her walk home.

The motive was soon explained. Whenever the girls got into the quieter streets, Ju-ju spoke with almost painful earnestness:

'You have found me out, Miss Compton, without being able to help it. I embroider at home, for Mr. Blackburn's art department. I dare say you have observed that I work rather closely, though embroidery is a pleasure to me also. Other people in the house have noticed it, though of course nobody asks any

questions. My mother can only afford me a small allowance. I could not dress and go out like other girls, if I had not an additional income. I assure you, many girls design or embroider on private commissions, which are the best, as they are for friends ; or for the art-schools, where the girls have been taught ; or for art departments in some of the great shops, and nobody outside is any wiser. The rage for art-work is such a boon to people who would not think of working in any other fashion. Art-work can be done by any lady, without loss of caste, and if you will believe me, many ladies do it for pay who are in no want of money, as I am sorry to say I am. Some of these are connected with the nobility, as you are, and, for the most part, they do not care though it is known they embroider for money. They laugh and boast of it, and are as proud of their earnings as if they were sums gained at Monte Carlo, or the payment of wagers, or the prices of books or pictures which the girls had written or painted. I have heard of girls who have had the sovereigns that have been worked for pierced so that the workers might dangle and display them at their watch-chains, like so

many charms. But it is a different thing when working is a necessity. I don't think I should work if I had a good allowance or a rich father,' admitted Ju-ju; 'and I believe, in my case, it is certainly much better to say nothing about it. So, Miss Compton, I shall be very much obliged to you if you will not mention what has come to your knowledge to-day—not even to my mother, though I need not say she is aware of my arrangement and has given her full consent to it.'

This was a revelation to Iris, but she did not stop to enquire if the game were worth the candle. She did not weigh against each other the false pride of girls like Ju-ju Haigh, who eked out their means and supplied themselves with foolish extravagances by labouring in strict secrecy for tinsel—not bread; and the childish vanity of the wealthy aristocratic girls who vaunted their uncalled-for achievements in the shape of working, at will, for a few sovereigns, twice the number of which the workwomen wasted every day they lived. It just crossed Iris's mind that there was a performance resembling this on the part of the ladies of the French *noblesse*, before the great revolution, when dainty fingers osten-

tationously unravelled gold thread in lace which had decorated coats of husbands or brothers or sons, and sold it as bullion. But she drew no inference from the comparison.

Iris did not even speculate how it comes that to work at art designs and marvels of embroidery, which after all, beautiful as they may be, are superfluities, can be more honourable than to work at the homeliest useful work, which is of still greater necessity to the welfare of the world than the coin with which the primitive toil is remunerated ; she only thought that she too could do this artwork, while she might not be fit for any other.

She had delighted as a simple matter of taste, when she was a girl at ease, in the revival of art embroidery. She had practised it with enthusiasm, and had attained some local eminence by her performances. She had watched Ju-ju's achievements with intelligent admiration, and been able to offer her available suggestions and help sometimes. Now Iris ventured to propose, a little breathlessly in her excitement :

‘ Could I do anything for Blackburn’s ?

Would they care to employ me? I should be glad—thankful, if they would try me. I need not say I would do my best to give them satisfaction.'

Ju-ju received the proposal more graciously and encouragingly than her mother and the other ladies had met Iris's candid statements of the obligation on her to find work and wages. Ju-ju, confident in her own skill and experience, feared no competition in her special province, while, on the other hand, she was inclined to clutch at another example and to prove that lady-like girls, even girls connected with the nobility, freely adopted her calling. The work had something refined and picturesque in it, after all, recalling old queens and chatelains with their noble maidens and bower-women, the Bayeux tapestry and other less ambitious but still remarkable performances.

Ju-ju readily undertook to communicate with Blackburn, and exhibit some specimens of Iris's capability as a nineteenth-century Arachnë. Mrs. Haigh shook her head, and was troubled by the anomaly; but Ju-ju had sufficient influence over her mother to prevent her doing more.

Blackburn was a genius in his line ; he kept all the strings to his bow and all the arteries of his vast organization under his personal inspection and control. He had found the secret of success, in the path which he had struck out, to lie in universal applicability and novelty. He had boasted that he could furnish, on due notice, whatever the heart of man or woman could desire—whether the customer were a prince or a princess, a dock-labourer or a charwoman ; and he had reclaimed his pledge by providing an elephant within four-and-twenty hours of its being asked for, on one extraordinary occasion. He was proud of his last development in an aristocratic art region. He magnanimously enjoyed solacing the idleness of rich, the sorrows of poor gentility, 'that would never recognise him and his, in spite of his celebrity and wealth, as the equals and privileged associates of its members. He relished highly, as Fouché did, counting in his pay sprigs of the nobility, who were also among the chief purchasers of his rarest and costliest adaptations from Worth.

Iris did not know how much she owed

again to her grandfather and grandmother, when, to her great relief and something like happy bewilderment, she found herself at once approved of and appointed on Blackburn's staff. She was even entrusted with very valuable materials, including an idea with a suitable moral, by a well-known artist, the cartoon to be destroyed as soon as a single copy was worked, of a screen in three panels.

One panel displayed Arachnë in her earlier humanity, carried away by conceit in her weaving; the second gave the cowering foolish weaver-woman brought face to face with the great goddess Minerva, whom she had dared to challenge to a trial of skill; and the third represented Minerva looking down in supreme contempt on the humble spider and her web, all that remained of the presumptuous Arachnë and the product of her loom.

Long afterwards Iris was wont to view that trophy of bold, true, delicate, if formal, lines, traced in softest, richest silks, with many mingled feelings. In the meantime it was a congenial occupation, as well as a bracing effort at independence, for Iris to

work faithfully and lovingly at the great artist's fancy.

Iris needed this help for her heart and mind, her faith and patience, while the summer was yet young, since every day the weather was growing warmer and the season drawing nearer to its climax. The garden in Fitzroy Square, which had been a pleasant oasis in the dreary desert of stone and lime when Iris came, became prematurely sere, yellow, and brown in its lack of country freshness, country freedom, country wholesomeness, of gradual, bountiful growth and decay. It seemed to miss half the stages of vegetable existence, whether of autumn bravery of colouring, or of a winter robe of spotless swan's-down, instead of a rapidly melting, smutty, grey travesty of snow.

The society of the boarding-house had lost its strangeness to Iris, but it had also become more and more irksome with a constant reminder that she was out of her element among people whom she neither judged, nor condemned, nor despised, but not one of whom bore much more than a human, national, tolerably civilized affinity to her, in her nature, beliefs, and habits. She had a

notion that she might have fared better in some of the other houses in the neighbourhood ; especially she hankered after those that appeared occupied by struggling artists. But the Haighs held themselves aloof from Bohemianism in every shape, reckoning on drawing their clients from more solid and substantial, if less original and enlivening quarters ; even Ju-ju only cared for artistic circles, inasmuch as they supplied her with canons of taste.

Many of the residents in the house were going away with Ju-ju Haigh to pay visits to the sea-side, to Normandy, or the Engadine. Iris's choice of society, such as it was, began to narrow just as she had a craving for it to widen. She would be left almost alone in the white dusty streets by the time she thirsted intensely for a quiet, sandy-coloured country road running along a reddish, purplish-green stretch of common or down, the shade of trees, the cool ripple of water, the yellow corn-fields ripening to harvest.

The figure of an old woman, loveless and unloved in her solitary age, sitting at home in her cheerless great house, or driving out by herself in her close carriage on her mono-

tonous round, had reproached Iris, from the first, many a time. The reproach was more than half morbid, for Lady Fermor had never shown that she cared for her grand-daughter's company, and she had driven Iris from her, by persecution and panic, which might have worn the girl into her grave, or carried her to a madhouse.

CHAPTER XXX.

AGE PLEADS.

IRIS had been out for a little more air and a saunter in the greater space of Regent's Park, when, just as she re-entered the house, she met Mrs. Haigh in such a state of consternation that the girl's roused imagination could settle on no smaller calamities than the kitchen chimney on fire, to the destruction of the eight o'clock dinner, or to the first clerk in the great banking-house having announced his intention to set up an establishment of his own. But Mrs. Haigh speedily undeceived her.

‘Oh, my dear Miss Compton, *she* is here ! Lady Fermor is here, and I dared not attempt to deceive her about your being with us ; indeed, she did not ask ; she simply said, “Take me to Miss Compton,” and she walked straight into the drawing-room, dismissing

me with a nod, and staring about her without troubling to return the bows of the assembled ladies, to whom I gave her a general introduction. They have all left the room, and she is sitting there alone, for Haigh has declined to have anything to do with her. I am afraid you must go to her and find out what she wants. If it is anything reasonable, if she wishes to board here along with you, I will do my best, though I do not know if Mrs. Judge Penfold and the rest will consent to be ignored, even by a viscountess—your grandfather was a viscount, wasn't he, dear Miss Compton? not an earl, as I am always inclined to make him—when they are all private ladies. If she thinks your board too high, though the times are terribly expensive——'

'I do not think that will be the reason of her coming, Mrs. Haigh. I shall go to her at once.'

The thought of her grandmother away from Lambford, from which she had not stirred for a dozen years, had a great effect on Iris. She felt it when she went into the drawing-room, where a moderate amount of second-hand, frequently incongruous furni-

ture was made to stand for a great deal, and for the accomplishment of entire harmony, to which the separate possessions of the different ladies, with the traces of their various avocations, lent an additional unhomelike heterogeneousness.

Whatever the person most concerned may have felt, it was a shock to her descendant when she saw the aged woman rooted up from all her old surroundings. Iris had been accustomed to think of her grandmother as about as stationary and constant in her attributes and actions as the fixed stars, as accustomed to be law to her house, the author and ruler of its whole economy, which for that matter proceeded from her will and existed for her pleasure.

Therefore the contrast was great of finding Lady Fermor seated uncomfortably in a chair which was the opposite of her own at Lambford, with Mrs. Rugely's easel at one side, and Mrs. Calcott's basket heaped with the badies' socks and pinafores, which she was always manufacturing for charitable bazaars, on the other, and Mrs. Judge Penfold's dog barking, and Ju-ju's kitten putting up its tail, as if to assail the intruder.

Iris's heart smote her, and she advanced quickly to her persecutress, crying out :

‘Oh, grandmamma ! I am sorry I have given you so much trouble, if you have come up to town on my account.’

‘You may be sorry,’ said Lady Fermor emphatically, extending two fingers to her grand-daughter. ‘I have come a long journey on your account. I am here to fetch you away ; so you had better get ready as soon as possible, and not keep me waiting longer than you can help. The carriage is at the door.’

Iris was taken aback. This was not like the scoffing leave to go which had been granted to her at their last meeting. To return to Lambford, though she had not been very happy in Fitzroy Square, was never what Iris had intended ; all the old objections to her residence with her grandmother, which had grown unbearable, might still remain in full force. The loathed apparition of Major Pollock, of which she had got rid lately, seemed to rise again before her and make her flesh creep. For anything Iris knew he might have come up with her grandmother to London—he might be in the

carriage outside, ready to spring upon her, in a figure.

She could not resign herself again to the old tyranny, the old taunts and indignities which had threatened to thrust her on the most miserable fate that could befall a woman ; not for her native air and the place and the people she had known and loved so long ; not for Lucy Acton, who had expressed herself by letter as dubious of the step Iris had taken, even while condoling with her most sincerely on the causes which had led to it, could Iris make so bootless a sacrifice. But the assurance of the shrivelled-up wreck of a woman before her staggered Iris, and caused her to hesitate what to say or do.

Lady Fermor delivered herself of a gesture of impatience, and called out harshly :

‘Have I not stooped enough, girl? Would you have me humble myself in the dirt to tell you I’ll never mention poor old Pollock’s name to you again? If you had not been a prim, scared idiot, you would have known it was not in earnest. I have got one of my other grand-daughters, Marianne Dugdale, to be a companion for

you. I have taken a house in Kensington, that you may spend a few weeks in town before all the world is gone, in a manner more befitting your antecedents. Afterwards I am thinking of a little trip to Buxton, or Scarborough, or Scotland—I am not too stiff to accomplish it—and let you two girls have the benefit of it. I dare say you will turn up your noses because Buxton is not Spa or Homburg, and Scarborough Compiègne, or any other French place frequented by the ex-Empress, and Scotland Norway. But I can tell you, when I was young, a girl would have counted such an excursion an opening for making her fortune, and a wonderful stroke of good luck.’

‘It is kind of you to put yourself about,’ faltered Iris, not at all sure how her words would be taken. ‘We are much obliged to you. If I could only flatter myself you wanted me—you really wanted me—grand-mamma,’ said Iris, with a more uncontrollable break in her voice.

‘Oh, as to that,’ said Lady Fermor, carelessly shaking out her sable-lined cloak, and giving a twitch to the strings of a new and striking lilac satin bonnet, ‘I got on very

well by myself. You need not flatter yourself that you are of so much consequence. It was Thwaite, who came over and dug into me to go and see after you,' with a keen glance at Iris.

'It was very good of Sir William to think of me,' said Iris simply.

'Oh yes, we're all kind and good now, when you've had your swing, and we're ready to look over and make the best of a girl's incredible folly. Thwaite brought Marianne Dugdale and me to town, but you need not thank him for it. I imagine he has taken a fancy to Marianne, and though she's a goose, like the rest of her kind, she won't be so goosey, perverse, and infatuated as to hold out against lawful authority, and a thousand advantages far beyond what she could hope for. By-the-bye, I hope Marianne's having stepped into your shoes, both with regard to Lambford and Whitehills, will not interfere with your throwing down your arms, and submitting to your natural superior,' wound up Lady Fermor, fixing Iris with a wily, glittering eye.

'No, no,' said Iris hastily, falling into the trap forthwith, lifting up her head invol-

untarily, unconscious of a bright spot rising on each cheek. 'Why should it? But there are some other things to be thought of.'

'Out with them. Am I to go down on my knees to beg your pardon?' with a feeble movement to rise from her chair. 'I have long thought the world was upside down, and this will only be the reversal of our natural position. Come, let me get over it as soon as possible. I should not mind it, if my old knees were not so rheumatic.'

'Grandmamma, I beseech you don't,' implored Iris, in terror lest Lady Fermor should carry out her horrible mockery. 'How could you think or say such a thing? I only wished to tell you that I have paid my board, but Mrs. Haigh has made arrangements for me remaining much longer. I cannot help disappointing her perhaps, but I ought not to let her suffer otherwise.'

'Humph! very impertinent in her to have anything to say to you at all, and still more impertinent to go on forming plans without consulting your friends, but we must take that with the rest. I'll settle with the lodging or boarding-house keeper, or whatever she is. Any more stipulations?'

‘I have taken in work—art-work—from Blackburn’s, and I have expensive materials to account for, as well as the piece I undertook to embroider.’

‘Good gracious, Iris! were you mad? How could you disgrace yourself and me in such a manner?’ cried Lady Fermor, stumbling to her feet. ‘You might have gone on the boards with less scandal, if ever such an act of low-lived absurdity come to light. We must drive instantly to the shop, and buy up all you had to do with—only buying up will stop the man’s mouth; and though it were half the shop, the sacrifice must be made. When I engage in a thing, I go through with it. But your vagary is likely to cost me a pretty penny, Miss Compton, in addition to aching bones. You had better think twice; or rather, I hope you will be off my hands before you engage in another. After the good education you had—even though that woman Burrage was a fanatic—to descend to the gutter by taking in work from a public shop!’

‘It was plain that in Lady Fermor’s old-fashioned estimation, art needlework was not a whit better than white seam; and she con-

sidered that Iris Compton had let herself sink, in the course of six or eight weeks, to the level of a shirt-maker or slop-worker.

It was like a dream to Iris to find herself snatched away from Fitzroy Square. She left Mrs. Haigh in a manner consoled by the spectacle of the coroneted carriage at the door, and the undying recollection that Lady Fermor had called in person for her granddaughter, though her ladyship had not behaved quite so well on the occasion as might have been hoped for from a viscountess. Iris had promised to come and see them all again. On the other hand, it was certain that Mrs. Haigh's ladies, though they were ready to give honour where honour was due, would not have suppressed themselves to the extent of being trodden under foot by a titled sinner.

It was not so much as if the present—it was rather as if the recent past were a dream, when Iris knew herself sitting in her old place, listening to the old high-handed talk and vituperation that were yet not without a harsh kindliness, for which they were not at all indebted to Lady Fermor. They owed it solely to old home-like associations. But,

as Iris told herself, what could she have done after the chief grievance was removed, and her grandmother had bound herself to keep the peace, than return to her duty, and wear again the yoke of her youth?

The house which Lady Fermor had taken off its former tenant's hands, for the last few weeks of the season, was at Kensington Gore. It was beyond the precincts of Belgravia, and beyond the Knightsbridge art studios and the barracks, which, following the example of the ubiquitous mews, invade select territories. Its windows did not give a false idea, as they looked full on the refreshment and refuge of the grand old leafy gardens. The glittering pinnacles of the Queen and country's memorial to a good prince, with his other monument, the huge ugly dome of the Albert Hall, promising unlimited music, and the pile upon pile of the second national museum, offering numberless antiquities, pictures, the Raphael cartoons, were all close at home. So was the Row, with its mid-day horses and riders, and so was Hyde Park, with its afternoon stream of carriages, and not very far off was the Broad Walk, that noblest avenue in which

old court beauties, fair French *émigrées*, the world of fashion and letters, once came to see and be seen, to sun themselves, and shine as lesser luminaries, reflecting welcome rays on the obscure world crowding to gape and stare at the town lions. There was the plainest of brick palaces winking and twinkling with its many white-faced windows in the sun, or looking grim and uncompromisingly prosaic in the shade; but never to be forgotten in its lack of all architectural stateliness and beauty, because there the great ones of other generations, kings and queens, statesmen and generals—not lost among starched and soulless court officials—had been born, or died, or had spent, in the glare which surrounds a throne, some of their brief fateful days.

Iris had never before lived in such a charmed region, where the hours might well seem too short for the attractions which claimed them; but she hardly noticed it at first, she was so full of excitement and anxiety about her cousin, Marianne Dugdale. The relationship that connected them, to which Iris, in the absence of nearer kindred, might have felt fain to cling, had been marred by old sins and sorrows. These transgres-

sions, poor faithless souls feel tempted to fear, are more frequently visited on innocent, sensitive victims than on guilty, callous culprits. But when it comes to that, the vicarious suffering may be the most powerful means of saving the sufferers from the transmission of the moral taint.

Lady Fermor had been plagued by few scruples in calling this other grandchild to her side, but Iris retained a pained recollection of what her grandmother had said with regard to the light in which the Dugdales and the Powells must regard her, Iris. They might owe some charity to their grandmother, but they owed none to her. She was only a rival claimant for Lady Fermor's bounty, the grand-daughter of the man who had foully wronged their grandfather. It was a case of family guilt and alienation which could hardly be repaired even between the harmless representatives of succeeding generations.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MARIANNE DUGDALE.

ANY faint hopes of amnesty which Iris might have entertained were extinguished ; her face fell and was dyed with a crimson blush of shame and confusion, at the reception she met with from Marianne Dugdale. The young lady had been riding with some country companions who had turned up in town, opportunely for her. She had come back almost simultaneously with her grandmother and Iris, so that Miss Dugdale was still standing in the hall, holding up her habit with one hand, and releasing herself from the burden of her hat in the hot weather with the other, when Lady Fermor called out, ‘ Are you there, Marianne ? Come here ; I have brought you Iris Compton. Let me see if you two cousins have any look of each other.’

Marianne turned round and showed a short but well-balanced, well-carried figure ; a face from which all the dusky, not particularly tidy hair was swept back from the good forehead ; a pair of the darkest brown, keenly enquiring, nay, haughtily challenging eyes ; an ivory complexion, as if pale with passion ; a straight nose ; a mouth so shaped to pout that one could hardly conceive it pacifically straight, or drooping lugubriously at the corners.

Marianne Dugdale was one of the pale roses so much in fashion, well set in thorns, if ever rose were so set. She made a queer half-mocking little bow, touched the tips of Iris's fingers with her own, and saying decidedly, 'There is not a shade of likeness between us, granny,' turned away and ran lightly up a flight of stairs.

'How she detests me, at first sight ! Though I cannot help it, I need not wonder at it.'

Iris took the manner of the reception to herself, in distress and humiliation, and asked in nervous apprehension with what show of friendship and enjoyment the two could live together, and go out together,

certainly for the next month or two, possibly for years? She would have repented quitting Fitzroy Square and returning with Lady Fermor, if her grandmother had not come for her, made terms with her, and, as it appeared, constituted it Iris's duty to submit.

For half a week Iris remained disabused of the impression that she was an object of half-righteous, half-vindictive abhorrence to Marianne Dugdale, who was watching everything Iris did and said with a hawk-like alertness which Iris felt far transcended her own mortified well-nigh timid inspection of her cousin.

The first thing which shook Iris's belief in her kinswoman's *rôle*, as a small black and white Nemesis, was Iris's observation of the inherent youthfulness which clung to Marianne Dugdale. Iris knew they were much of the same age, but she had been feeling a woman for years now; she was certain she presented no such juvenile traits as were constantly peeping out in Marianne Dugdale, and largely qualifying a nature that even in early womanhood was sharp, shrewd, and full of self-reliance. There was the oddest mixture, the result of early forcing and con-

temporaneous neglect, of strength and weakness, boldness and shyness, confidence and distrust, tenacity and collapse, in the little square-shouldered person who was to divide with Iris the claims of the young ladies of the family and the filial duties of grandchildren to Lady Fermor, both in the house at Kensington Gate and elsewhere. The double temperament and training betrayed itself even in Marianne Dugdale's physique. Her little chubby hands were dimpled like a child's, and while they were tolerably useless in some things—notably in woman's work—in others they displayed the dexterity of an intelligent mechanic. The owner of the hands had been very irregularly educated, but she had a scientific, particularly a mechanical bias. She preferred mathematics and chemistry to history and literature, while she had a side for fiction and poetry; with a greater resemblance to men than to women in this respect, she relished an opportunity of working with wire and wood; she bored and whittled like a boy; put all the bells right in the house at Kensington Gore without the assistance of a workman, to the amazement, amounting to consternation, of the strictly

conventional London men-servants and maid-servants; rectified the unevenness of various articles of furniture, and set straight every picture that was hung wrong by a hair's breadth.

Her voice, in the style of her hands, was furnished with a singular variety of tones, some of them strident and self-assertive enough, others—mostly addressed to children and animals—were wonderfully winning and sweet, full of childlike vibrations, and an irresistibly coaxing ring.

But Marianne Dugdale's attitude to her grandmother, Lady Fermor, was the most puzzling and characteristic of any. In one sense the girl openly defied the formidable old woman, and took the control of herself, Marianne Dugdale, into her own hands, where she had been early accustomed to keep it. She proposed to do in London and at Lambford exactly what she had done in her father's country-house, in the depths of Devonshire—and that was very much what she liked.

In another sense, the strong, ardent rejoicing youth of the girl had an underlying fund of generosity and pity for the old

woman's position, fighting against infirmity on the brink of the grave. After a conspicuously self-willed action or flippant speech, Marianne Dugdale would suddenly turn, as if moved by a different spring, and speak the gentlest words she had uttered that day, refrain from resenting a jeering rejoinder, refuse to be held back by any chilling repulse, decline to quail or to recoil passionately from offering to the stout-hearted, thankless rebel against her own needs and other people's devices, soft, cherishing aid.

Iris looked from one to another in marvel to see how Lady Fermor would stand it—the open, scarcely seemly contradiction—the sudden sweet, tender amends; and if anybody had presumed to observe and applaud the relenting, the likelihood was that Marianne Dugdale would have gone off at a tangent—harder, sharper, more dogged than ever.

Lady Fermor's looks and words offered a new field of conjecture to Iris. There was a strange, suspicious forbearance and obliviousness about Lady Fermor's dealing with Marianne Dugdale's behaviour, which Iris suspected was made up of new sensations—

considerable amusement, and an abiding conviction that in spite of all the restiveness and waywardness, she, Lady Fermor, was mistress of Marianne Dugdale, and could easily crush her opposition whether in great matters or small. There was no coherence as yet in the warring qualities in the girl's disposition, no principle of steadfastness to enable her to pull herself together and resist any impulse, whether for good or evil, advisedly and to the end, no outward abiding support. She was physically fearless to daring, but it remained on the cards that she might prove morally weak as water.

Iris was not thinking of herself, but she was as a still, deep stream, obeying a great law, which, however ruffled, could not be diverted from its course and was full of reserved power.

Marianne Dugdale was like a brawling brook, spending itself in foam and noise, rushing hither and thither, in wandering channels, either to lose name and identity, or to discover itself suddenly turned aside, and notwithstanding its raving, carried where it would not, to turn some wheel, form some reservoir, or serve some foreign purpose for

which it had not the slightest inclination. Iris arrived at the sound conclusion that, however indifferent or even averse to her a girl like this might be, it was hardly probable that she would figure in the light of an avenger of hereditary injuries. Marianne was not made of the stuff that constitutes an old supporter of the Vendetta, or a modern Nihilist.

It was on the occasion of Lady Fermor's persistently twitting Iris, according to an old bad habit, which their recent compact had not interfered with, that Marianne Dugdale abruptly declared herself on the side of her cousin, called her 'Iris' in those accents which, when they were friendly at all, sounded as if they came fresh from a warm, true heart, and might wile a bird from a tree. She walked over to Iris's side where she sat in one of the windows looking out across the crowded traffic of the road to the grand alleys of the gardens. Marianne knelt, or as she would have called it, in her scorn of sentimentality, 'plumped' down before her cousin, leant her crossed arms against the frame in which Iris was working at the *Arachnë*, amidst altered surroundings, and

began to chat over the events of the day in which the girls were mutually interested.

The action was the nearest approach to a caress in which the least caressing of girls was likely to indulge. It was also a pretty, unaffected movement, at once confidential and implying more or less voluntary allegiance.

Iris welcomed it gladly, and with as much cordiality at it was wise to display to a wild bird that might take alarm and start off on the smallest provocation.

Lady Fermor had never known the love of woman to woman, and had been as incredulous of it as many men are, or pretend to be. She had never looked upon her own sex otherwise than with a mixture of dislike, suspicion, and contempt, as natural enemies and rivals, or as poor inferiors. She now regarded the little group before her with a snort of exasperated scepticism. ‘Well done, young ladies!’ she said sardonically, as she rose from her chair with an effort; ‘the pose is very pretty, but it is wasted upon me. You ought to keep it for *les jeunes ingénues* like yourselves. Oh dear, no!—don’t, I beg of you, disturb yourselves on my account,’ as

she stumbled and recovered herself on the way to the door, and both of her granddaughters were starting up to her assistance. 'I hear Soames coming to tell me I ought to be lying down ; but if she proposes to hug me, or even to kiss my hand, I'll dismiss her on the spot. I make it a principle not to encourage humbug.'

'“Don't be too affectionate, Charlotte, or I'll kick yer,” Marianne quoted audibly from 'Oliver Twist.' Then, as the door closed, she appealed to her cousin. 'Now, Iris, you've known granny a great deal longer than I have ; but I have seen enough of her to dare you to contradict me, if you are in the habit of speaking the truth, when I say she is an abominable old woman.'

Iris looked down into the clear, searching, imperious eyes fixed on hers, then before she answered looked away into the green gardens. Happy little children played there from morning till night. Invalids in Bath-chairs were pulled along that the sick folk might look with their dim, faded eyes at the sunny sky and the flowery earth, and know summer had come again, and dream for a brief moment that health and strength were

not fled for ever, but might return once more. Men of business, pursued by cares and worries, undertaken for women and children, trudged home from their offices. Those mature pedestrians, who ought to have known better, fondly persuaded themselves that they had found a natural refuge by choosing, in preference to the rattle of vehicles and the constant interruptions of the streets, this comparatively quiet ground, with the grass beneath their feet and the trees above their heads ; but the deluded men only used their leisure to think the more of the business they had meant to leave behind. Lovers sat on the benches, and looked into each other's eyes, and exchanged a word now and then, as if they had sat there since the gardens were opened, since Adam and Eve walked in the garden of Eden, and could be content to sit there for ever. Iris left her needle sticking in her work, clasped her hands, and spoke piteously :

‘She belongs to other times and other manners, so that we cannot judge her and her temptations. She has lost all she loved and honoured, and she does not care any more for love and honour.’ Her voice

fell as if this were, what indeed it was, the crown of human wretchedness.

A passing shade of awe crossed Marianne Dugdale's dauntless face, but she did not refrain from proclaiming triumphantly : ' Then, Iris Compton, we can be friends. I agree with what you say. She is a miserable, old, old granny, and sometimes I would give anything to help her. But I was trying you to see if you were goody-goody, as she said. She told me it was because of your goody-goodness you ran away ; and if you had begun to preach to me about reverence, and the duty and privilege of respecting and loving that dreadful old woman, though she is a poor old soul all the same, to whom we have the misfortune to be related—I should have given you up at once, since I won't be preached to. Luckily, granny, however horrible otherwise, never tries on that : and, like her, I make a principle of never encouraging humbugs.'

' Everybody is not a humbug who does not go about proclaiming all the truth, who even keeps back as much of it as is possible sometimes. You would not expose a wound to shock your fellow-creatures,' remonstrated Iris.

‘No—yes. You are talking of a different thing. I shall always speak the truth—I have never told lies. I should not know how to hold my tongue. And you—you were not altogether silent in your conduct; I mean when you ran away. Ah! I have you there, Iris.’

Iris winced before this very plain speaking. ‘I thought I was forced to leave grandmamma,’ she said, ‘but I did not go clandestinely. I dare say she told you that also; for whatever she has done, she is a truthful woman, Marianne. It was not a pleasant experience. I do not like to speak or think of it, and I do not care to speak ill of Lady Fermor when I am eating her bread. Remember, she has brought me up. I have lived with her all my life, as you have not done.’

‘The more shame to her, then, to speak to you as she did a little while ago—as she is constantly doing,’ asserted Marianne Dugdale roundly, ‘and the more fool you to let her. I shan’t run away, see if I shall. I shall stay as long as she will keep me, or till I make the place too hot to hold me, since I have come to granny, though I hated

the thought, for the good of the other girls, and because papa scolded and mamma cried about our poverty. But she shan't take me off, or put me down, or domineer over me, you notice, Iris. I will manage better; and neither shall she ride rough-shod over you any more, if I am here,' declared Marianne, in the tone of a gallant little cavalier who means to fight in defence of his lady. 'You are really a great deal too good for her, instead of thinking only of yourself, and preaching to every other person in the goody-goody fashion I feared, and have been looking out for, every day since you came. But it is not true; you are quite an honest, reasonable, jolly girl. I shall do what seems best to me, and you will do what you think proper, and if granny will only consent to behave herself tolerably for an old woman, we'll do all we can for her.'

'I am much obliged to you, my dear cousin,' Iris was forced to laugh, 'but you must not mind me. Lady Fermor and I understand each other, and I am not often vexed by what she says. People at her age are privileged. It is only her way of joking. You must mind yourself. You may not find

it so easy for you as you suppose, though I need not say I will do all I can to help you.'

'I do not see how there can be any difficulty,' said Marianne, a little offended in her extravagant independence and self-confidence, as she rose to her feet and prepared to stroll away. 'I have always got my own way, at least almost always. Papa is constantly up to his ears in business, and a very bad business it is with the agricultural interest gone to the dogs. Mamma is too lazy, and reads too many novels to take the trouble to call me to order. She never had a mother of her own—at least the one she had was as good as none; and her father was soured with his misfortunes, so that her spirit was broken when she was still a girl; but I am not going to lose my spirit. The other girls, Cathie and Chattie, are younger than I am, and I rule them instead of their ruling me. There are the boys, to be sure,' said Marianne, with a momentary pause.

'I thought you had no brothers.'

'Oh no! not brothers, but as good—rather better—five cousins; Tom and Ned, and Dick and Harry, and Charlie. Tom

and Ned are going to India, and Dick and Harry are at Cambridge. Dick is to be a barrister, and Harry an engineer. Charlie has had thoughts of the Church. The rest of the boys say he has plenty of "jaw" if his mind were made up, but I don't believe he ever will make it up. My mind is made up that he will choke on the Thirty-nine Articles. He is the only sop among our boys, and he is dreadfully spoony on Cathie, which is a great bore both to her and the whole of us; to me more than anybody else, for I was understood to look after them and keep them from running into mischief—at least till Sir George came home.'

'What a responsibility!' exclaimed Iris, with proper sympathy; 'and who are all these boys you have on your mind?'

'Of course sons of papa's brother, Sir George, out in India. He has been a widower ever so long, and sent all the boys home when they were young to papa and mamma's care. She and papa were glad to have them, both for their own sakes—since boys are so much nicer than girls, and because their father, Uncle George, is a great swell in the Civil Service, who can not only make good

allowances to his sons, but is coming back to provide for us all when his time is out ; only he may die, no doubt, or marry again, or do something out there before he is able to think what he is about. I have been a great deal more with the boys than the girls. Even Cathie, the sister next me, is three years younger than I—a soft little mortal, who can't say “bo !” to a goose or to Charlie. I flatter myself I *can* play cricket, and take a fence, and drive, and row, and chaff. Boys will chaff and criticize, but I didn't often give in to them, I assure you.'

These were advantages of education of which Iris could not boast ; before which, with their results, she must often sit dumb, though she had not been used to regarding herself, or to being regarded by others, as a particularly weak and helpless young woman.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LADY FERMOR'S YOUNG PEOPLE.

THERE was a budding phase of life of which Iris in her isolation had known little or nothing. Except at the Rectory, she had scarcely come into familiar contact with a gay, accessible, yet engrossed and restless group of young people like herself. And at the Rectory, life had consisted simply of a family party, into which Iris was admitted by special favour. It was her fortune in the weeks spent at Kensington Gore to form one in a cluster of young people of more varied elements, not related, not like, for the most part only recently known to each other, yet who seemed suddenly, in spite of what might have been regarded as insurmountable barriers, to wax well acquainted, and to a certain extent intimate. The result was produced largely by the freemasonry of youth, and by

a certain simplicity of character which distinguished more than one of the number. Perhaps something was due also to that curious fusing influence of London, or any other great city, on individuals who, however dissimilar otherwise, resemble each other in having been brought together unexpectedly, in coming from other spheres, in being strangers together in a new field, making a common experiment in a complex, manifold life. The group was so far well matched that it consisted of two girls and two young men—Iris Compton and Marianne Dugdale, Sir William Thwaite and Ludovic Acton. He was doing nothing more heroic at this time than studying the science of the sea and its ships with their work and warfare, at Greenwich Hospital, converted into a college for aspiring able-bodied lieutenants, as well as for more juvenile naval recruits.

Iris and Sir William Thwaite met as friends of old standing, and they also met more as contemporaries and equals than they had ever done before. Iris had fallen into the habit, in the past, of classing him among middle-aged and elderly people, even while she had felt inclined to coach him and lend

him her countenance in seeking to serve him. Doubtless this was the consequence of his real and supposed disqualifications for figuring among the young people to whom the Squire of Whitehills should have belonged, and of the gravity and formality of manner conspicuous in a man bent on fulfilling his obligations to society, while very doubtful of his power to fulfil them.

It surprised Iris to hear Marianne Dugdale, who, after she had found her tongue, was frank and free in expressing her opinions on every subject, mention Sir William casually as 'a nice young fellow.'

'Oh! I know what you are thinking of,' Marianne cried, in answer to Iris's bewildered look. 'He was not always a gentleman, and he made a foolish marriage, and went to the bad for a time. I know all about him,' continued Marianne, who had a mania for universal knowledge and capability, and was apt to leap to the conclusion on slender premises that she was mistress of both. 'But what of that when he has redeemed his character? Down where I come from we would say he could not help the first, and he was very much to be pitied for

the second. Men are not perfect. If they are manly, honest fellows, and do their best, we need not wonder though some of them have a fall or two. We may be glad when they can pick themselves up again, as they do after a spill in the hunting-field, and be ready to lend them a hand, and expect them to give us another if we come to grief. Oh ! we are not so starched and severe, and, upon my word, I do not think we are the worse Christians for it down in my part of Devonshire. Neither are we such prigs of scholars or such very fine ladies and gentlemen as to refuse to forgive a man for a false particle, or even for a verb or an adjective out of joint, or because he keeps on his hat, or does not take off his muddy boots, or bolts his knife, or puts his feet on the chimney-piece—not that Sir William Thwaite commits these enormities to my knowledge ; I merely used the similes to give point to my assertions. What would a host of them signify if he were a man and a gentleman at heart, as I am sure he is ? Yes ; I know all about him, and I say he is a nice young fellow, fairly handsome, with a fine carriage. He is not stupid a bit, for he has told me ever so many

things I wished to hear about India, where Tom and Ned are going.'

Iris remembered Sir William's passing another examination in reference to India with great credit.

Whatever Marianne Dugdale had learnt she had certainly not been informed, for whatever reason, that the Squire of White hills had been a rejected suitor of her cousin's, an amount of ignorance for which Iris was devoutly thankful, and which she earnestly trusted would receive no enlightenment.

Lady Fermor had made a supererogatory statement that Sir William entertained a fancy for her other grand-daughter. Marianne, on her part, openly professed an interest in him. Iris, too, had an interest different in origin and kind, which included thoughts of poor Honor Smith, and a wonder whether *she* were altogether forgotten. Iris tried to look at Sir William in a new light with impartial eyes. He was certainly a young man, not over thirty, although he looked old for his age. Strong and comely, in spite of a certain wayworn look, a trace of trouble, a shade of sternness, which lent him a kind of

dignity. Yes, there was a homely dignity about him ; and his manners, though these were blunt and unsophisticated, were no longer laboured and artificial. He had ceased to think of what had become in a measure habitual to him. Other and infinitely heavier considerations had totally outweighed social dogmas, and from the moment that he had regained his liberty in this respect, the man and the gentleman at heart shone out in his words and actions. Where there is no longer anything to conceal, and not a grain of pretence, there may still be rusticity, but there is no room for vulgarity and pettiness.

‘ Heated hot with burning fears,
And dipped in baths of hissing tears,
And battered with the shocks of doom
For shape and use,’

Sir William was a rustic gentleman, but he was not unworthy to rank with the best, not the worst, of the class to which he had risen. Iris was able to comprehend how a young gentlewoman, a little rustic herself, rather masculine, after the fashion of the generation, in temper and training, with a natural impatience, and scorn of forms and ceremonies and nice outward distinctions, should fra-

ternize with a Sir William, and hold him in sincere esteem, even in high regard, in defiance of what carping people persistently remembered and chronicled against him.

It was impossible for Sir William not to respond within limits to the generosity and kindness of the girl, as he had done long ago without bounds in more difficult circumstances, to the generosity and kindness of another girl. It was therefore quite true that he was on very good terms with Marianne Dugdale, to the extent of submitting to be chaffed by her, as if it were a pleasure to him, and of bluffly chaffing her in return, as he had never dreamt of chaffing Iris Compton. It was perfectly possible that something—a great deal—might come out of these terms.

But Iris soon discovered that another puppet was to play his part in the little drama, a puppet with such strength of feelings, hopes, and wishes, that he threatened to produce a serious complication of the plot. Ludovic Acton had been at Greenwich before the date of Lady Fermor's arrival in London. He had been commanded both by his mother and Lucy to call immediately on his father's most difficult parishioner. Being greatly

under female commanders from the moment he put his foot on shore, he had reported himself at Kensington Gore before Iris was transplanted there. He had done it in the way of duty, and with the usual failure of poetic justice in the affairs of men, in the very act of filial, fraternal, and neighbourly goodwill he found himself, as he had soon to own with a groan, 'completely done for.'

King Lud had happened to pay his first visit when Lady Fermor was not out of her room, and he was handed over to a wonderful dark-eyed girl, with a little mouth, a square chin, a square yet symmetrical figure, altogether, habited in a sort of workwoman's blouse, in which she did not seem to feel the least put out. She stepped briskly from the conservatory, where she had been knitting her brows, and pouting her lips over the dilapidated rock-work, the rolled-up tarpaulin which ought to have shaded the roof, the syringes which would not spout water, the sickly plants ravaged by the green fly. She scarcely waited to hear his name, and to listen to his modest explanations and apologies for intruding on an unknown young lady, before she told him :

‘Oh! I know who you are’ (it is a wonder she did not say, ‘I know all about you’). ‘You are the son of the Rector down at Lambford. Your people said you would call, and I am glad, because sailors are handy, and you may be able to help me. Come and see the disgraceful wreck of a London conservatory.’

King Lud went and saw and worked with Marianne Dugdale for half an hour, and did not conquer, unless in the trifles of nailing up some of the higher dropping-down cork rock-work, erecting the tarpaulin in its proper place, clearing out the pipes of the syringes and playing them on the astonished green fly. As if that were not enough for the entomological specimens, Marianne gave her order, ‘Smoke, Mr. Acton—smoke!’ It was like the royal child’s command to the wise and witty author of the ‘Three Estates,’ ‘P’ay, Davie Lindesay—p’ay!’

King Lud, too, complied forthwith, consoling himself for having to light and puff a cigar in such a presence by the true conviction that those pretty fresh lips, frank and fearless as they were, had never been soiled by so much as a cigarette, for the country

Amazon of high degree is more innocent and unsophisticated than the same Amazon belonging to the town. He was conquered himself, hard hit, beaten to the wall at the first bout. He had never seen such eyes, or worked in company with such clean baby fingers. He had never met a girl so genuine, so original, so unconscious, so bright. He might have added he had never been so warmly congratulated for small achievements, or so soundly rated for sundry little mistakes—in the height and flutter of his admiration, in fastening the cork and the tarpaulin.

In his entire subjugation her Majesty's officer called again at Kensington Gore on the following day, under the poor pretext of renewing his smoking operations against the green fly, which the butler could do more effectually than a visitor could manage it. On his second call Ludovic saw Lady Fermor, and she who had never been deficient in hospitality to young men, made him free of the house during her stay in town. She did not withdraw this permission, as she might have done, when she found that the Rector's son availed himself of it on every possible and

impossible occasion, until his visits to town must have made a tremendous inroad on his studies at Greenwich. In fact it came to this, that King Lud, who had been heretofore the most diligent and devoted member of his profession, appeared to be living in the College at Greenwich for the sole purpose of paying court to somebody in a house at Kensington Gore.

Lady Fermor was very old, but she was neither blind nor deaf to the extent of the infirmities interfering seriously with her intercourse with her followers. She was not a fool, and she had other plans and projects for her grandchild ; but she was 'a cool hand' and a bold player. She was fond of a fair field and no favour in the game of life, and it is to be feared she had downright satisfaction in making mischief between men and women. She let Ludovic Acton call or come to dinner or form one of the escorts to the girls as he and they chose. Lady Fermor let Marianne Dugdale talk to the lieutenant by the hour, satisfying her inquisitiveness, which was immense, about all the ships he had been in, and all the service he had seen, about the North Sea and the Coast of Africa, and the dock-

yards at home, about his experience of the different modes and rules for cricket and foot-ball and lawn-tennis.

Lady Fermor never interfered. She seemed to suffer the young people to take their swing in the easiest, most inconsiderate manner. Yet when Iris came to think of it afterwards, she could not recall one occasion when the old woman, apparently doing nothing, had not so held the shuttle and chequered, twisted, turned back and directed anew the threads which were to weave the pattern in the web of destiny, that Marianne Dugdale, who imagined herself a free agent, did not stay at home when she had promised to go out, walk with Sir William when the arrangement had been that she should walk with Mr. Acton; did not wear the one man's flowers and sing the one man's songs when she had accepted the other's bouquets and undertaken to warble his ditties.

The policy might be Machiavellian, yet it was simple enough, and it had a foundation prepared for it in a headstrong girl, calling out for her own way and getting it, but swerving aside and giving in because she had still those troublesome commodities—a conscience and a heart, not to speak of a suscep-

tible vanity and a temper even more susceptible and easily played upon. She had also a large supply of what old-fashioned books call 'frowardness,' which owned no control, and could be reckoned on to influence Marianne according to the principle on which some pigs and donkeys are driven, if one may be forgiven the inelegance of the simile—start them with their faces due north and they are safe to back due south.

Still more ready-made material for an enemy of Marianne Dugdale's to employ to her detriment, was to be found in the fact that she was a born coquette—born, not made—above all, not in deliberate, guileful, perhaps mercenary practice, which constitutes all the difference in the world. Without doubt, her rearing among the tribe of boys who were as good as brothers, yet who were not brothers, gave early stimulus and scope to the bent; for she liked attention, not from one squire alone, but from all who came within her orbit. Without thinking what she was doing, without any conscious motive, especially without a set aim to an end, Marianne had an instinctive, exquisite enjoyment, inscrutable to Iris, in smiling and frowning,

praising and blaming, pleasing and teasing, coaxing and vexing—as the waters came down at Lodore—now Sir William, now Ludovic Acton. This was done in a manner calculated to set the two young men, who had always been on civil terms, and when left to themselves were growing friendlier every day, as much by the ears as if they had both been their tormentor's devoted slaves.

That one of the gentlemen was Marianne Dugdale's devoted slave neither she nor anyone else could long deny, while she was inflicting alternate ecstasy and misery upon him. But jesting at scars because she had never felt a wound, Marianne did not mind the responsibility in the least ; if anything, it added zest to her entertainment. Thus she never ceased laughing at poor King Lud's moon of a face and his tow-coloured hair, apparently without any clear and forcible conviction that these not strictly picturesque attributes belonged to a brave, honest gentleman on whom it was a shame and disgrace for any woman to inflict an unnecessary pang.

In her thoughtlessness, her gaiety and kindness degenerated into careless selfishness and positive cruelty. Iris could utter no

protest, though her heart waxed hot within her, because there were considerations which stopped her mouth, and because Marianne would not be preached to, and must be taught neither by precept nor example, but by what is frequently the grimmest, as it is certainly the most efficient teacher of all, bitter experience. Hers was really a fine, open, even loyally affectionate nature, but in the meantime it was in a state of chaos, not cosmos. There was no reign of duty in the soul, no supreme sovereignty tending to bring every thought and affection into noble subjection. There was no leading, binding, restraining principle in her life, though she had been baptized and confirmed, and called and believed herself a Christian.

It was a lively surprise to Iris at first, when King Lud presented himself day after day at Kensington Gore, without a single musical instrument in his pocket, when he was punctilious in never asking for music more than once in the twenty-four hours, since Marianne Dugdale, though she could sing like a lark when she chose, was only moderately fond of the joyous science, and had been heard to speak disparagingly of musical men.

Accordingly Ludovic Acton was resentful to the verge of repressed fury when Iris referred without malice to his stock of musical instruments, and expressed innocent surprise that he no longer cared to accompany anybody on the piano. 'Why did you say that?' he took her to task as if she had been one of his sisters, and with as much indignation as if she had accused him of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. 'I am not fonder of music than other fellows.' Then in answer to her 'Oh, Ludovic!' 'I mean than other fellows who have idle time on their hands, which they do not well know how to get rid of. I say, Iris—Miss Compton—it was rather nasty of you—I mean it was hard upon me, to bring up that about my flutes and guitars. I am sick of them, and shall have a private sale the next time I am afloat. You have heard her—Miss Dugdale—laugh at cater-wauling fellows, and no poor beggar likes to be an object of ridicule in his set.'

The abandonment of the former ruling passion in favour of a far mightier, of one of the great fulcrums which bend and twist the human heart, so that vestiges of its work often survive all else—even the object which

called it forth, struck Iris as a most formidable symptom of poor King Lud's fatal malady.

The season was approaching its close when Lady Fermor came up to town, and she made that an excuse for no formal bringing out of her grand-daughters. However, they came in for the fag-end of the gaieties, which were still fresh and agreeable to them. Country neighbours of Marianne Dugdale's fortunately in town, one or two Eastham families that had condoned Lady Fermor's offences long ago, supported the two girls, stopped them when they were driving with Lady Fermor in the Park, offered in the persons of the matrons to chaperon the cousins, and invited or procured invitations for them to the last plays, operas, flower-shows, breakfasts, and balls. These invitations, by Lady Fermor's desire, included Sir William Thwaite and Mr. Acton.

The girls were called upon to wear their pretty demi-costumes, their daintiest walking array, with bonnets which were little more than coronets of flowers, parasols which were mere handfuls of lace, and gloves that were buttoned to the elbow and beyond the elbow, and yet were the most fairy-like gloves in the

world. But what was the effect of any walking garb to the shining or gauzy evening robes with more flowers, the hair turned back or in little waves as usual, in the most natural and quietest fashion, but for the diamond band or the diamond stars which flashed out from the red gold or the dusky brown little heads !

Lady Fermor not only grudged none of these expenses, she ordained they should be incurred, and evinced a certain cynical satisfaction in hearing that her two fair young grand-daughters formed an admirable contrast to each other.

Iris waltzed again, as a matter of course, with Sir William, and if either remembered the former occasion he or she made no sign. It was no business of hers, neither did she know it at the time, but one of the balls happened at a great house which had given a similar rout years before, when a member of the present company had stood among the rabble round the door and envied the very footman whose flesh-coloured calves were so much at home on those stairs, and asked despairingly whether he could ever be at ease in such regions ?

Now, so far as that went, he was as undisturbed in mind as when he traversed the old barrack-yards, and sometimes Iris Compton hung upon his arm, but the spirit of the dream was changed.

In addition to a taste of the good things of the season, there were many sights for Lady Fermor's young people to see, and this business they prosecuted with commendable assiduity and considerable satisfaction. The last would have been still greater if there had been no such disturbing element as the rival claims of Sir William and King Lud, with the rapidly developing moon-struck madness of the lieutenant.

Still these were exacting, engrossing hot days and nights when there was always something to be done which could not be put off, whether it were an excursion to Kew or Richmond, an old-fashioned survey of the Tower or the Mint or the Mansion House, services at Westminster or St. Paul's, visits to the Ladies' and the Strangers' Galleries in St. Stephen's, an enterprising hunt for old china, dawdling at Morris's or Burnet's, distributions of prizes for window-gardening under difficulties, mornings at the crack

training school for nurses, the Hospital for Incurables, the last best crèche. It was a marvellous jumble, and though Iris was tempted to think the unlooked-for holiday was alloyed by the sport which Marianne Dugdale could not resist making with her two Samsons, perhaps without it the whirl would have lacked some of the eternal play of human passion and warfare of mortal life. There would have been a certain spice to the intercourse absent if it had not been for the sentiment that manifestly pervaded the contending factions. To say nothing of the under-currents which might be doing their own work, there was something rousing in the spirit of indignation which filled Iris when she saw one or other of the victims specially ill-used. There was zest for more than one person in every event likely to satisfy the craving curiosity to know beyond mistake whether or not Sir William and Marianne Dugdale were merely playing parts at Lady Fermor's instigation and under her influence, whether the play might not grow second nature and end in earnest, whether Marianne's maiden meditations were still as fancy free as she

professed, or whether they pointed to the well-endowed Baronet or to the poor naval officer.

Marianne had made one sacrifice for the sake of her family, but those who argued, from that event, that she would make another and greater, on her own behalf, did not understand the girl. She was more likely to act on a whim, an impulse, a chance—as Iris never could have acted, and possibly repent and cause another to repent at leisure, for the rest of her life. It was likely to remain an unsolved problem to the last moment what Marianne Dugdale might or might not do.

Iris, without a severe analysis of motives, without outspoken confidence as yet even between her and her old playfellow King Lud in his need, acted as consoler to each of the young men in turn; for wounded pride, and mortified masterfulness, and sheer irritation caused by an exasperating process, require soothing, as well as outraged love.

But Iris was angriest and sorriest for Ludovic Acton. Sir William might put in a claim as having borne the brunt of repeated disappointments and trials, but he had learnt

at last to wear a calm front to the world. And if he were proposing again to marry on the prompting of a third person, after all he had suffered, because a suitable alliance was desirable for a man in his position, then there was a good deal that was incorrigible in his conduct which, though it encountered loss, could not command sympathy.

Sometimes Marianne took it into her unaccountable vagrant fancy to take umbrage at all the three others, and would as good as quarrel with them so far as they would let her. She would withdraw herself as much as possible from association with them, go about her own business and leave them to bear each other company and get on as well as they could without her.

It was then a pitiable case with the poor fellow who gave himself up to uncalled-for self-reproaches and desperate apprehensions because of his mistress's inexplicable displeasure. But in spite of his groans, there was a considerable amount of fraternization between the deserted members of the party, and a good deal of pensive and humorous enjoyment—not so much in airing their grievance, for they were too true and too

much inclined to be attached to Marianne Dugdale to take that course, but in enduring her capricious humour and the temporary banishment, if not from her actual presence, from her goodwill and merry conversation. When the affair was hopeless the company would let her go off by herself, as she insisted on doing, to secure friends for whom she would flaunt a preference that passed away soon. The trio would bring themselves to obey her literally, and let her alone, stamping about the back drawing-room or sulking in the conservatory, while those in disgrace would linger apart in the farthest window, or would pluck up a spirit and take it upon them to get their hats and stroll across the road to the adjoining gardens. There the three would walk up and down beneath the trees, carefully keeping in sight of the house lest Marianne should return to her right mind in a twinkling, as was her wont, forgive them in a body without telling them their offence, and come out after her brief eclipse, the blithest of them all.

The promenaders would talk Lambford and Eastham assiduously. It was then that Iris found out how Sir William had come to

know and to love every hazel copse and sunny sloping field and rushy brake on Whitehills. She and Ludovic, who had been brought up in the parish, were not better acquainted with its dear old holes and corners and fonder of them than this comparative new-comer. Neither could she fail to perceive, little as it was intruded on her, the interest he had learnt to take in the people, especially in those who were most dependent on the consideration of their neighbours, how much sympathy he had for them, what good sense and good feeling and dry humour into the bargain he showed when he talked of them, how attentively he listened to every suggestion on their behalf.

And how many notable books he had been reading! Books of which King Lud had not even heard the names, books which she had longed for, but had not yet been able to procure. To think that Sir William, to whom she had tentatively lent 'Tom Brown's School Days,' in connection with whom she had not been without thoughts of adding to the other book 'The Water Babies' and 'The Heroes,' by way of tit-bits to encourage a literary appetite in its infancy,

should have got in advance of her here, as he was before her and King Lud in sundry original, intelligent investigations he had instituted, mostly in the track of natural history! His occasional half-eager half-thoughtful references to those experiments sounded as if he might live to attain some distinction among the students of nature.

What advances he had made in true manhood! How he was casting off the slough of the lower animal! How fast he was growing in his solitary life at Whitehills! What would Honor have thought of him if she had lived to see him now? Ah, poor Honor! her life could hardly have been his gain. Her death was part of his emancipation. But if she saw it all from beyond the golden gate, from within the silent land, where she might have found Hughie Guild, and be walking with him by the water of life, would she not be more than content?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GREENWICH AND THE ACADEMY.

KING LUD was almost frantic with delight on account of an ovation which was to be paid to him, not by the multitudes of the city, which his great namesake is said to have founded, but by two or three quite private and obscure persons, one of whom, a square-shouldered little individual, with a strong dash of the child still in her wilful girlhood, had turned the unfortunate fellow's head. His friends, with Marianne Dugdale among them, were to go down to Greenwich to spend an afternoon there under his leadership and drink tea in his room. Lady Fermor declared herself equal to the effort, even though it had been a dinner in the Trafalgar, a great deal better than the Ministerial white-bait dinners, such a dinner as she had been accustomed to attend at least

once or twice in the season, both there and at the Star and Garter, Richmond, with shady cronies whose disreputable names were no longer heard, while happily the very scandals in which they had figured were fast being forgotten.

The day was as fine as could have been wished for 'a family party,' as Lady Fermor called it, complaining that there was a danger of its being as dull as family parties generally were. They drove down to the dirty little old town of Elizabethan and naval memories, and made their way to the grand terrace before Queen Mary's and Sir Christopher Wren's Hospital, which time's changes have converted into a college. Everybody's spirits rose. How could he or she help it under the inspiring influence of the blue sky and the wide flowing river—the great watery highway to the largest city in the world? The widening mouth of the English Thames, which, though it is little among its mighty brethren the Volga and the Danube, the Ganges and the Euphrates, the Nile and the Niger, the monster Amazon and Mississippi, yet bears upon its breast such a huge and precious burden of traffic as they

never knew. A brown 'streak' turned up with silver, it swayed and rippled and throbbed, with its fringes of tall masts and flapping sails, from Gravesend to Wapping; its Isle of Dogs converted into a custom-house station; its Deptford ringing with hammers as when Peter the Great riveted a bolt there; its Woolwich Marshes bounding the Arsenal, where Woolwich infants are cradled and rocked. Barges laden with hay and coals crept lazily along with the sunlight red in their umber-coloured sails. Steamers churned the water as they darted by, puffing out grey smoke and wreaths of white vapour. Here was the column erected to the gallant young Frenchman Bellot, who earned the gratitude of a foreign nation by the fruitless attempt to discover its lost heroes beyond the terrible barriers of everlasting snows and huge glittering icebergs. He left half his tale untold, but there was a living man—sandy-haired, moon-faced, large-limbed, standing there, among the everyday group, who, if he were permitted to leave out his own doings, could add something to the fascinating ghastly story.

Within the big-domed building was the

Painted Hall, with the portraits of all the Captains bold of whom the best artist in each man's day could leave a token. There were the reflections—often with the show of their ships at their backs—of Drake and Blake, Rodney and Anson, Cloudesley Shovel and Benbow; and in a shrine by himself the various representations of 'Harry Bluff,' of whom, when he was a fearless midddy, the old salts had sworn,

‘One day he'd lead the van ;’

and here he was, from the maimed lad still foremost in the fray, to the man with many orders on his breast dying in the cockpit of the *Victory*.

As if these were not mighty names enough to conjure with, and pathetic stories sufficient to melt the hardest heart, there were the weather-worn, far-borne, simply tragic relics of the last holocaust to the spirit of the North Cape, the sad trophies brought back by Dr. Rae : battered spoons with familiar crests and initials, a watch long stopped, torn leaves from a Bible and from Oliver Goldsmith's sweet old English inland story, in which there is no echo of the thunder of the surf,

and little more travelling, after all, than what is chronicled in the first chapter of the book of the change from the Blue Bed to the Brown.

For once King Lud was the most favoured of men in his surroundings, and he rose to the occasion. He descanted, all the more tellingly that it was with modesty and sincerity, on the true glory of his profession, its adventures, exposure, self-denial, and self-sacrifice. Who could think of the advantages of a good English estate, even of a fine old English manor-house and an ancient title, at such a moment? Not Marianne Dugdale, who was entranced with all she saw and heard, until she envied the little boys climbing the rigging of the training ship and the very invalids in the floating hospital of the *Dreadnought*. She had the different parts of the vessels, the science of their steering, the method of their logs, the movements of their compasses explained to her. She did not tire of hearing the curious details of their flags and signals; she was not at rest till she had walked across the park where Greenwich Fair was wont to be held, as far as the Observatory, to have her watch set by the great dial, and she honoured

the lieutenant by appointing him to conduct the operation. Iris and Sir William were strolling among the English elms and Spanish chestnuts, past the railed-in stump of a tree garlanded with ivy, which is said to have been a stripling when William and his Normans conquered Saxon England, to One-tree Hill, in order not to miss the second of the three finest views of London, rising dimly out of the haze and extending in a grand sweep from the water-towers of the Crystal Palace to those cupolas of Sir Christopher Wren's, while all the time the faint hoarse murmur of the terrible mill which grinds, not corn, but human hearts and brains, was heard without ceasing, uttering its fit accompaniment to the scene. As for Lady Fermor, she was long ago under the sleepless guardianship of Soames, being made as comfortable as circumstances would permit in the lieutenant's room.

King Lud might live to perform more lion-like actions than he had yet accomplished. He might be a full-blown admiral, with his sandy hair powdered with white, while he halted on one knee after the fashion of Horatius Cocles, from spent shot or baser rheuma-

tism ; but it was hardly likely that he would ever spend a happier afternoon than that which Lady Fermor and her party passed with him at Greenwich.

Everybody awarded a tribute of praise to the owner of the room in the Hospital College for his expert contrivances where space and convenience were concerned. Everybody turned over his books and admired the flowers—Kent dahlias and gladioli, fragrant jessamine and heliotrope, with which Ludovic had promptly provided himself to do honour to the occasion, and to dispose lavishly on every side, in order to embellish his plain bachelor's quarters and poor lieutenant's equipage.

Sir William Thwaite leant his back against the chimney-piece, thinking honourably and humbly how nice and pretty it all looked, wondering how Acton could manage it, if he were naturally 'a dab' at arranging his cabin, or if the inspiration came with the visit of his queen to his small lodging. He—Sir William—did not believe he could have done anything like it, to save his life, with all the will in the world, and the accumulated materials at Whitehills. The only time the

place had been *en fête* in his day, Sir John's widow was in command, and she had produced nothing so spontaneous and refreshing as this ; but it was too late to take a lesson.

Lady Fermor had the seat of honour—the single easy-chair in which the lieutenant was wont to lounge, smoke, and read—nod, Marianne Dugdale alleged.

The two girls lingered by the high window looking down on the water, with its never-ending charm. They were dressed alike in stuffs of the dusky-red colour which fashion has called in to take its place, by way of contrast, among the pale and neutral summer tints of the last decade. The dark red is especially welcome with the first breath of autumn, when all nature is ripening and mellowing to richer, deeper dyes. The girls were as decorative as the flowers, and for that matter they had taken what they liked from King Lud's abundant treasures. The primrose and orange nasturtiums, white jessamine, and purple penstamens, culled from the lieutenant's improvised beau-pots and posies, came out with charming effect against the Venetian-red background—so did the shell-pink of Iris's cheeks with the golden-bronze

of her hair, and the creamy-white of Marianne's skin with the mouse-brown of her 'top.'

The little sobering sense which was left in King Lud was all but ravished from him by Marianne's gracious offer to make tea, asserting brightly that it was just like doing it for 'our boys at home,' and summoning him, as if he had been her special boy, to stand at her elbow with the camp-kettle—in itself a pleasant curiosity to her.

The close and collapse of the gala—for all happy things come to an end here, and not a few of them, alas! collapse in the very process of enjoyment—was brought about by the intervention of Lady Fermor. Even she had been taken captive for the moment by the fresh, heroic, homely elements of the entertainment, to the extent of being subdued by them for a little while. But when the party were taking a final saunter down the Painted Hall, in which the shadows were gathering, so that the painted warriors were growing obscure on their stations, and only one flaming yellow and red picture, indicating a ship on fire, stood out from the dull darkness of the others, like a portent of evil, Richard was himself again.

Marianne Dugdale was walking as if in a dream, wonderfully silent for her, with her brown eyes a little downcast, beside Ludovic Acton, who, though he wore no uniform, seemed for the moment transformed—sandy hair, shyness, softness to women and all, into one of the heroes on the walls stepped out of the canvas, reflecting glory on one proud girl by his notice.

Lady Fermor was stamping along by the aid of her stick on Marianne's other side. Suddenly she raised her harsh, highly-pitched voice, and at the same time cast a meaning, satirical glance at her grand-daughter. 'I think I miss a picture which ought to have been here too—that of blubbering Black-eyed Susan, following her truant "sweet William" on board the fleet in the Downs.'

Marianne started, wide-awake, flushing to the roots of her hair. 'Oh! she was an odious creature,' she said. 'Thank goodness, she is not here. Indeed, I think a sailor should have nothing to do with miserable whimpering sweethearts and wives. His ship should be his mistress, as a priest should be wedded to his flock.'

'My dear Marianne, I never knew you

had adopted the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church,' remonstrated Iris, laughing at her friend's vehemence, and feeling for King Lud, at once lifted from a pinnacle of exultation and dashed into the depths of despair.

His very rival commiserated him. 'I thought blue-jackets carried all before them when they went a-wooing,' said Sir William, without any suspicion of cynicism.

'They are no better than red-jackets, or any other jackets,' answered Marianne rather testily than with an implied compliment.

Very likely she had forgotten Sir William's former connection with the army, and in good truth he had no reason to recall it with pride; but the most sensible men are silly on some points, so he blushed a shade with gratification, though he maintained magnanimously: 'You don't mean to say any woman could have resisted the French chap commemorated out yonder, or the boy whose statue we saw in marble, the great statesman's son, who spoke of his mother and his native town, and how happy they would be to welcome him home, when he lay a-dying through volunteering to carry succour to the forts in

the rebellion ? That was before my time ; but I've some notion what it meant. Supposing either of them had lived to come back and lay his laurels at a woman's feet, do you suppose she would have spurned them ?'

'The laurels have to be gathered first,' said Marianne drily ; 'and when I come to think of it, I am sick of what people call "the pomp and circumstance of glorious war." What did all these battles and all these bloodthirsty commodores and rear-admirals come to ?—I mean what lasting good did they do, unless to their blustering, strutting selves ? Who were really the better for them ? I believe it would be easier to say who were a great deal the worse. What hearts they broke ! How many widows and orphans they made ! I think I shall go in for the Quakers and the bloodless victories of peace.'

'But some men must fight that peace may be preserved, and the helpless defended from injury,' remonstrated King Lud, recovering from the vicious snub administered to him, with the attendant amazement and discomfiture. 'A sailor's life is far from all

fighting, especially in these days. Our squadrons lie along many a shore to check more powerful rascals than slave-dealers. We crush, in their infancy, aggressions and outrages to which the barbarities of the slave-trade are a trifle—short in time and limited in extent.’

‘A sort of water-police,’ said Marianne contemptuously.

‘And sailors are still finding new lands and helping to civilize wild states,’ suggested Iris a little injudiciously.

‘Not in my opinion,’ alleged Marianne, with her neat little nose in the air. ‘My conviction is, that frigates and gunboats float about in disgraceful idleness, in order to keep up the taxes, which papa is always groaning over. Besides, we must maintain a navy which is no longer wanted, in order to provide genteel sinecures for the younger sons of gentlemen—fellows who cannot get along on shore. For my part, I would rather herd sheep in Australia or hunt ostriches in Africa, or turn a vulgar, respectable shop-keeper at home.’

The attack was so outrageous that it became laughable. The eclipse of the sun

might nevertheless have come to one person through a girl's spirit of contradiction and craven susceptibility to ridicule.

But to the others the sun declined in its ordinary fashion as they skirted the shoulder of Blackheath with its girdle of villas. It was a mere sunset, but it was such a sunset as the neighbourhood of London renders unrivalled in its kind. Iris was compelled to acknowledge that the misty flats of Eastham, or of Holland itself, for that matter, could do nothing to those marvellous shades of saffron and gold, faint coral, dusky sorrel, the dim lilac of the autumn crocus, and a grey steely blue. Was there something human in the pathetic glory of the skies above the great city of vast wealth and grinding poverty, foulest sin and fairest righteousness, many crimes and many sorrows, much nobleness, much holiness, and much innocent, grateful gladness? Did the groans and curses, tears and sighs, smiles and laughter, go up from tens of thousands of hearths to paint themselves in that solemn, subdued glow?

The Academy was not yet shut; and out of many visits one stood out in the remem-

brance of the little company that so often met together in these weeks. They had all been tolerably united in their criticism. They had agreed that English landscape-painting held its own as in the days of Gainsborough and Constable and old Crome; that the mantle of Sir David Wilkie still fell, here and there, on the painters of the ruggedness and the humour, the exquisite tenderness of peasant life with its homely affections. These were no more sordid and petty now, to the hands that could draw and the eyes that could read them, than they were nearly a century ago to the brave, gentle son of the Fife manse, and his enthusiastic admirers. Heroism quailed a little before the cynicism of the generation, but picturesqueness and passion made a vigorous stand against the learned affectation of burning incense to colour and form alone—colour and form without a soul human or divine, or else with a soul rejecting all humanity as devoid of dignity and interest unless it came in the shape of pagan Greek myths and Roman crimes and feasts, sensuous and sensual, petrified in their passion, cold in their exaggerated repose, because the faith and heart

of man have alike forsaken them, and they live only as carefully conceived, exquisitely executed conceits and richly decked phantoms, dragged painfully from a past which, having no parallel in the present, can scarcely be regarded as the type of the life of all the ages.

One at least of the visitors was sorry, with a yearning regret and a shamed mortification, that the sacred art which once made Italy, Flanders, and Spain glorious—on which men spent their lives—into which they could then throw their hearts—was so feebly and scantily represented in Christian England. Iris was inclined to ask, ‘Will there come a renaissance here also ? and will the Christ on His cross, the Virgin Mother, and the noble army of martyrs replace once more Apollo and Venus with their votaries ?’

Most people will allow that it becomes in time weary work for eyes and brains to study even the flower of the year’s pictures. It will be so even when the much-tried and abused hanging-committee have done their duty perfectly, in which case there will cease, no doubt, to be painter hermits and misanthropes, Timons of Athens in art, who

decline in savageness or scorn to permit the muddle-headed, vulgar-minded public to gaze on the artist's transcendent, mysterious achievements. But it is not so universal an axiom to the many, it may come with a shock of surprise to some, to learn that it is possible for bodily fatigue to end in crossness of temper even with the young and strong, the ardent and intelligent. For that matter, still more with the young and strong than with the middle-aged or the old and feeble, who have been compelled to bear the brunt of many a burden—be it a pleasure, and to feel the weariness of life even in its most enjoyable hours.

Will it be believed that Marianne Dugdale, after having entered with much enthusiasm on this as on other rounds, by the time she felt a falling to pieces of the backbone, a heaviness and ache of the brows, a slight swimming of the eyes, and giddiness of the brain, was about as much out of humour as could be said of an impatient-tempered girl who, if she were not arrested in time, would develop, without fail, into a hard as well as a true, a fiery no less than a warm-hearted, vixen?

‘What !’ does anybody ask ; ‘is it possible that such an ill-bred, captious girl, who played with a gallant, modest gentleman’s devotion, and ungratefully turned upon him in the height of his happiness, spoiling it utterly that afternoon at Greenwich, can still have “followers,” in the vulgar sense of the term, and fast friends worthy of the name ?’

In the first place, there is an undeniable and a piquant stimulating charm—to begin with, at least—in the natures which are rarely two hours alike. Such dispositions appeal at once to the pride and to the chivalry of certain men, to tame the shrew, and to save her from the tyranny of her humours. These consist not infrequently of the heady effervescence of good qualities suffered to ferment and run to waste—hatred of dissimulation, indignation at injustice and wrong, strength of attachment to another person, violence of disgust with one’s foolish self. Above all, Marianne Dugdale’s present companions possessed the touch-stone which could go beneath the surface and penetrate to the core of her character. They looked on her with kind, friendly eyes, and could not help being fond

of her. The two men and the woman knew it was only fair to recognise that if one of them had been evidently more tired than the girl was, or had met with the slightest accident, or had become suddenly a little ill, or even had been merely old and tottering like Lady Fermor, whom her grand-daughters had no cause to love and honour, Marianne would instantly have come to the front like a heroine, would not only have borne any suffering of her own like a martyr, but would have died sooner than confess to such suffering.

As it was, however, Marianne commenced to snap up her companions' harmless remarks and execute half-comical, childish growls at which no one ventured to laugh, to flout the others, to flounce about by herself.

Soothing was tried in vain, compromises were disdainfully rejected, proposals to bring the day's visit—the final visit to the Academy—to a summary close scouted at, humble suggestions of an adjournment to the refreshment-room for a glass of claret and a slice of chicken, or a cup of tea and a stale bun, treated as a positive insult. When it came to this pass, Marianne's adherents drew dis-

creetly apart, freed her from their observation, and sought to occupy themselves with what remained of their morning's work. Only King Lud was too miserable to accomplish the assumption, or practise the restraint of indifference. He feared his mistress might be ill, for it was quite possible that Marianne would only display her bodily distress in this perplexing, mental fashion. He knew at least that she was unhappy for the moment, and he could not endure the thought of abandoning her to her unhappiness. He followed her at a respectful distance, patiently waiting for any sign of relenting and recovery, when he would gladly take upon himself the blame of having been stupid, tiresome, and positively cruel in inciting an unfortunate girl to do too much, and exert herself till she was half dead.

Iris and Sir William were together at the farther end of the room. He was pausing and brightening at some Indian scenes, showing his companion where the cane-brake or the mangrove swamp was trustworthy or at fault, explaining the native costumes and indicating the castes. He stopped at the occasional portraits of military officers as

pointedly as if he were going to salute them, and became excited and exultant over the likeness of one who had been a chief in Sir William's campaign. It was clear that he bore no malice against the service, that the disgrace with which it had threatened him had faded away from his mind, from the time that he had confessed and acknowledged the justice of the sentence. It was possible that in place of being humbled by the stripes torn from his arm, the ignominy of the lash hanging over his head, and the expulsion from the ranks in which he had risen to be an officer, it was the scar on his neck and breast, and the sword-cut across his arm, which for a moment burnt again with the proud consciousness that he too had been a soldier, and had fought and bled for England and his colours.

Unexpectedly the couple came upon a picture hung low which they had not observed on their previous visits. It was not a striking picture in size and situation, or in more than a moderate degree of artistic merit. It was the subject which arrested the two gazers, paled their cheeks, dimmed their eyes, brought a quiver to their compressed lips. The

painter unknown to fame had represented a drowned woman, washed gently enough on a pebbly shore by the rippling waves of a sea no longer raging in the fury of a storm. The limbs, those of a fine, strong young woman, were disposed decently and peacefully, as if a friend's hand had laid them to rest; the face turned up to the summer sky was unmarred in its still serenity. The head lay cushioned, as it were, on the wealth of brown hair which had broken loose and streamed like so much seaweed back from the bare brow and blanched cheeks. So had Honor lain on the Welsh beach. The thoughts of both of the spectators flew back to the disaster. Then the attention of the pair became concentrated and fascinated by a likeness—a double likeness. It was not wonderful that with their minds full of a similar catastrophe and its victim, Sir William and Iris should see a resemblance to the late Lady Thwaite in everything, save in the rich warm colouring which, to be sure, the cold sea and colder death had already stolen from her cheeks and lips before the husband was called upon to identify the body of his wife. But there was no reason

why either of the two, looking fixedly and silently at the picture, should simultaneously, as if by contact of thought, detect traits the same as those with which they were familiar in a living face in that very room. Sir William and Iris had never before compared Honor Smith to Marianne Dugdale. Size, colouring, circumstances, were all so different, that the comparison sounded absurd even now; yet there were the friends of both making it decidedly and unmistakably, until the eyes which had been averted looked into each other and claimed the wondering admission.

‘You see it also? Poor Honor and Miss Dugdale!’ exclaimed Sir William, half under his breath; ‘I never once thought of it before.’

‘Nor I,’ responded Iris, as low as if she were exchanging secrets with him.

They did not say another word. She glanced at him and seemed to find a shadow of half-superstitious awe on his manly, ruddy face. Was he revolving the curious undefined law, that what has been shall be again, on which gamblers base their calculations? The unexplained but acknowledged fact that, in the history of men as of nations, events

often repeat themselves, against all reason, against all warning, in a mysterious, well-nigh gruesome fashion? Was he judging rashly that it was vain for him to struggle against his fate? Did he seek to persuade himself that in this direction, after all, might lie at once the atonement for his past errors, and the building up of a new and higher character?

When Iris and Sir William rejoined Marianne Dugdale, she had so far come to herself as to suffer the companionship of the faithful lieutenant, and was no longer treating him worse than dog or mouse before she could consent to dote on him for ever. But the union was not indissoluble. Sir William Thwaite approached her with a forcible appeal and a pathetic reverence expressed in an eager concern for her welfare.

‘Are you tired out, Miss Dugdale? will you not allow me to find a seat for you? I will manage it, never fear, though I have to turn out by force that stout old gentleman, and that puppy-dog of a lad on the next sofa. I see you have your fan, let me fan you. I have a long, strong, steady arm; I could work a flail or a punkah without much effort. After you’re a bit rested and refreshed,

we'll drive straight home and do no more to-day.'

Thus the girl was caught and transfixed by the change from simple friendliness and from the half-frank chaff, the half-sparring flirtation into which Marianne Dugdale would have beguiled a man engaged the day before to the object of a lifelong attachment, or a colonial bishop just consecrated and on the eve of starting for the most murderous of half-heathen dioceses.

Iris knew that Sir William was moved by the recollection of his dead wife, whom he was confounding in a manner with Marianne Dugdale. But Ludovic Acton had no such clue to the problem. He was compelled to believe that his passive rival had suddenly become active and dead in earnest; while he was at the same time—from the support of Lady Fermor, doubtless—so well assured of the success of his suit, that he was already appropriating the tone of an accepted, privileged lover. He was proceeding to take care of Marianne, control, and even gently reproach her, in a manner which she would certainly not have stood from another person, however much his unbounded devotion might

have entitled him to forbearance. But, alas, alas! Marianne was not offended or aggrieved in this instance; she smoothed down her ruffled plumes, and submitted with a good grace to be looked after and comforted. She glanced with shy, puzzled inquiry into Sir William's intent face. Her compunction for something like a child's naughtiness, her swift brightening up again were for Sir William and not for King Lud. She was a woman; therefore she was caught by novelty and mystery; she was a woman, so she was fickle as the inconstant wind. She looked ready to be wooed and won by the altered aspect of the suitor whom Lady Fermor had provided for her grand-daughter, as King Lud had known all along to his sorrow and dread.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ON THE BORDERS.

LONDON was fast becoming a high-class social desert, a hot wilderness to be abandoned to its tradespeople and its poor ; even they were contemplating excursions to Margate, and tramps to the hop-gardens.

Lady Fermor was about to carry out the second part of her programme, and to save her from the danger of being left to the insipid society of two 'bread-and-butter misses,' she settled that she could journey by short stages as far as the neighbourhood of the first Scotch moor with unlet shootings to which the young men in her train might be induced to accompany her. No doubt Ludovic Acton was in daily expectation of an appointment to a ship, and might have to leave on a moment's notice, but in the meantime he served as well as another. The old despotic schemer, whose

excess of worldly wisdom sometimes led her astray, was of opinion that the poor lieutenant with his frantic passion, at which she was able to jeer and laugh, served in some degree as a foil and stimulus to Sir William in what must prove his suit.

King Lud had not given up in despair. No man worthy of the name will easily do so, when the prize to be resigned is the centre of his fondest hopes and aspirations. He had fallen out and made it up again with Marianne Dugdale many times since the day at the Academy. He was still not without a lingering hope that the privilege of travelling with her might do something for his cause. At least, it afforded desperately delightful opportunities for being at once the happiest and the most miserable fellow in the world—happy with a delirious satisfaction in the mere consciousness of being in her presence, of watching her and serving her—miserable in knowing how soon the close proximity to bliss would come to an end any way, and what a grievous probability existed, that by indulging his inclinations and feasting his passion, he would only reap additional disappointment and wretchedness in the end,

when the suspense was over, Marianne was Lady Thwaite presiding at Whitehills, and he a broken-hearted lieutenant far at sea.

In the beginning of the trip, King Lud's star was in the ascendant. Marianne was radiant and gracious in the enjoyment of all the pleasurable excitement and constant change of scene characteristic of an excursion such as she had never taken before. Since it was conducted to suit the requirements of a woman of Lady Fermor's position and age, there was not the slightest strain on any young person's powers. Indeed, Marianne used her Englishwoman's privilege of grumbling, simply because she had that most charming of all adventures of a phaeton running in her head, and was possessed by a rueful persuasion that she too could have driven many a mile under sunshine and shower, and the merry moonlight ; and if she had not been equal to playing on a guitar and singing appropriate songs under difficulties, she would at least have been quite fit for the gay scramble at bezique, and the judicious balancing of two encroachers on her freedom at the end of the day. But even a journey

in first-class railway carriages by short stages was not to be despised, when the destination of the travellers was the land of the mountain and the flood, of romance and canniness. The shortness of the stages and the breaking of the progress by a day's rest occasionally, to enable Lady Fermor to dine deliberately at her usual hour, to go to bed early and rise late, in order to recruit her forces, also permitted exploring strolls in every direction, and subordinate excursions in the interest of the younger members of the party. Thus the banks of the Severn were visited, the ancient streets of Chester perambulated, a raid made into North Wales, and merry Carlisle with its castle and cathedral learnt off by heart. The travellers were then not far from the Scotch Borders, and the final halting-place, the heathery wells of Moffat, did not lie much beyond the Marches. But unluckily, Lady Fermor caught cold, with a little cough, which teased her in the next stage of her journey, so that she adopted the resolution of stopping short and staying for a couple of nights at an old-fashioned inn, in which she recollected having been fairly served many years before. It lay at the junction of

the sister countries, and had originally stood on a great coach-road, a good deal frequented in its time. But since the establishment of railways and new routes, and the withdrawal of the coaches from the old tracks, nearly the whole of the traffic had departed from the place; still the old inn stood, and continued a house of lodging and entertainment for man and beast, on a new foundation, its later energies having been directed to affording board and lodging to families seeking a summer retreat, and to furnishing a resort for the anglers who frequented the 'becks' and 'burns' in the vicinity.

Lady Fermor declared that her old, plain, comfortable rooms, which were fortunately vacant, had not fallen off appreciably, and that she was satisfied she could have all she wanted, till a little rest enabled her to get rid of her cold.

It was a matter of congratulation to Iris and Marianne especially, that they should make this halt in an out-of-the-way corner, and begin their acquaintance with Scotland by an entrance which might be made on foot, and was not much frequented and rendered beaten ground to the destruction of all origi-

nal traits and native simplicity and individuality.

As for the male animal, usually so impatient of delay, and restive under what is a purely soothing and agreeable element to the female, the two young men were in that normal condition which occurs or ought to occur to a man only once in his life. They were at the beck and call of the women; the young fellows were meek and docile, ready to assent cheerfully to any arrangement, eager to display themselves in their best colours as they would never be again. For anything more, Sir William showed himself less drawn to Marianne when she was full of glee and enthusiasm, than when the shadow of a trouble, however groundless and self-made, hung over her. He left her to a considerable extent to enchant or plague King Lud, who was thus still hovering on the confines of gaining or losing the prize of his life, while Sir William nursed Lady Fermor, made his own observations, or walked about soberly with Miss Compton.

There was something of quaint dignity in the rural aspect of the inn. It was a steep-roofed stone house of considerable preten-

sions. The walls were rough-dashed and whitewashed, and further covered by honeysuckle in blossom, and the first 'red red rose' of Scotland which the English visitors had seen. They were told the house was an old Border mansion-house, much more recent in date than the crumbling grey towers and towns they had recently seen in Cumberland, but still old enough to have been beheld by Prince Charlie, had he looked that way in his memorable marches to and from Carlisle. The house stood in a rough paddock, shaded by a few gnarled old trees, and the whole lay in the shelter of the four sentinels—Skiddaw and Scafell rising to the south, with Criffell and the Lead Hills starting up to the north.

The party had private rooms, and so did not come in contact with possible dukes and probable bagmen, chatty or frigid, kindly or selfish old and young ladies. But Iris and Marianne made their own of a modest yet frank young chambermaid, the daughter of a neighbouring Scotch ploughman. She had lived all her life in the vicinity, and could tell her eager questioners the local names and identify to their satisfaction the merest purple

crown of every peak and the misty flash of all the 'wan waters' far and near. She was more intelligent than the generality of her compeers in England—the three hundred years or so of parish schools in Scotland having had their effect on the brains of the population. She took evident pride in her birthplace and country, and proceeded, on a little solicitation, to pour forth all the old stories which had gathered round a famous locality.

'It was a weel-kenned part aince, mem. A hantle bonnie English leddies and wilfu' English lads sought it out; whiles there were Scotch leddies and gentlemen came in secret, as far as the bounds o' Dumfriesshire and Kirkcudbrightshire, and rode cockin' awa' in braid day. But there was nae necessity for the like o' them taking sic a tramp; they just did it to be neebour-like. What for did they come, young leddies, are you askin'? Losh! div you no ken this was ane o' the toons*—my faither ay maintains it was the chief—where rinawa' marriages were ca'd

* The term 'toon' is used freely in primitive Scotch for any better sort of house—farm-house or mansion-house—as well as for a 'burgh-toon.'

aff, the knot tied and the couple buckled, so that neither faither nor mither, nor law-lord, nor minister o' the kirk, nor the king hissel' could rieve man and wife asunder again.'

'Oh, how nice! how funny!' cried Marianne, 'that we should have come by chance to such an inn! Tell us about these run-away marriages, Jeannie. Did any happen in your time? Did you ever see one?' while Iris prepared to listen with interest and amusement.

'Weel, I cannot just say I have, mem,' Jeannie was forced to admit, a little crest-fallen at having to fail 'fine, lightsome English young leddies' in such an important particular as would have been supplied by her having been an eye-witness to the deed, and so able to give personal evidence with regard to all that happened. 'Leastways I have never seen sic grand turnouts as I have heard my faither and mither, and still mair, my grandmither—wha's living to this day with a' her wits aboot her—crack about to their cronies mony a time. Sic marriages hae been going out o' fashion amang gentlefolks for mair than ae generation. But I hae seen a wheen ploughman billies, after a hiring-

market, the warse o' drink for the maist part, and as mony tawpies of field-workers—bondagers, folk ca' them here—and servant lasses—they werena nice—gang afore auld Fernie who had learnt the trade when it was flourishin', and still wasna unwillin' to win a shilling or twa by trying the auld trick, though the ministers on ilka side, o' a' denominations, are wild now against it, and fit to rug the head aff onybody that does siccan work. And, mem, it wasna a' fun,' continued Jeannie solemnly, for like a good conscientious lass she was exercised in mind by the minister's condemnation, every time it recurred to her memory. 'Fule lads and silly lasses have been carried aff their feet, and had to find them again an' rue their madness ower late. I hae seen a puir lad that wasna villain enough to forsake even the licht lass that hadna been ill to coort, and was his marrow from the moment they had joined hands, come up next morning, a' shakin', to the farm-toon where I was living in service, to seek his wife, an' hae to be telled whilk o' the glaiket lasses was she; and I mind a daft lassie fit to greet her heart oot, because she had to gang her wa's—for life, mind ye, mem—

wi' a lad she neither kenned nor cared for, seein' that she had only drawn up wi' him the day afore, for naething save to vex her ain lad, whom she had quarrelled wi' nae further gane than the market mornin'.'

'Ah, that was bad!' said Marianne, disappointed in her turn. 'I am afraid your ministers are right, and runaway marriages are not what they should be.'

'Weel,' said Jeannie, with her *amor patriæ* and her Scotch logic resisting even her loyalty to her minister, 'I'm thinkin' there's something to be said on baith sides. The brawest bridegroom I saw here was nae mair than a writer laddie, an' he ran awa' wi' his auld maister's dochter—a lassie wi' siller. But her faither was dead, and she was a saft snool, and had a lang-headed brither who wanted to keep the siller in the family—that was to him and his bairns—sae he was guard-in' her day and night an' would hae hindered her frae being married ava; and they said the writer lad, whether he had the siller in his ee or no, was douce and decent, and would be gude enough till her—far better than her ain flesh an' blude. Noo wasna that a deliverance wrocht by a rinawa' marriage?' de-

manded Jeannie triumphantly. ‘My granny minds o’ a sair fracaw about a wicket yerl whom naething would serve but that his genty* bit dochter should marry as auld an’ grand and wicket a sinner as hissel’. Her true love wouldna see the shamefu’ sacrifice, sae he up and fled wi’ the lass. He was a sailor or a sodger lad—an e o’ the twa, I forget whilk—a bonnie, brave young man, and he brocht the lassie here. They had but to say twa words to be beyond the power o’ ony faithers, to belong to ane anither as was ordained, so that she could follow the drum or sail the seas wi’ him, and only death micht part them.’

‘Come, this is better,’ cried Marianne, with a bright colour in her pale cheeks. ‘Tell us more about it, Jeannie. What excitement there must have been! Did the couple come dashing up to the door, their horses covered with foam, and the parents and guardians in hot pursuit?’

‘Na, that wasna the way ilka day. Sic wild wark and desperate risks were not tried often, though I hae heard o’ horses bein’ shot dead frae the foremost carriage, and drivers

* From the French *gentille*.

bribed to lame the puir senseless beasts, or to tint the road and whummle ower their cargy in the middle o' a peat bog, that took ilka man, that tried to stand up, to the houghs in water-holes, wi' nae means o' gettin' on, except by shank's naigie. But whiles, as in the story I'm tellin', the faither was sae close that the lovers daured nae drive up to the front door lest they should be owertaken afore they were made one. They left their empty chaise in a dip o' the road mair than a mile awa', as gin there had been a break-down. The driver galloped on his best horse—and they said it cast ilka shoe within the mile—to gie warning here, while the pair turned into a road—Cambus Road—and jinked by a foot-path to the auld Cambus doocot, that as a' the world kens is jist ower the Borders. There was in this parish a mass-John—that I suld be so far left to mysel' as to gie him sic a name, for he was a godly minister o' the gospel, in days to come. But he didna set his face against rinawa' marriages in his youth, for, licensed and placed though he was, he liked a ploy wi' the lave. What suld hinder him frae hurrying out to meet and marry the lad and lass in the doocot, as gin they had

been twa doos ? They were yoked thegither as sure and fast as if they had been a leddy and gentleman surrounded by a proud and blithe wedding company, in a fine house,* and blessed by a man wha had maybe christened her and catacheezed him. The driver and the leddy's-maid, wha had come wi' her mistress, served for witnesses. There was a wild set at Cambus Ha' at the time, but they were aye hearty and hospitable, and were gude to weddingers, whom they wadna thwart, sin' some o' theirsels had made rin-awa' marriages, wi' sma' credit if the truth were told. Ony way, the Cambus Ha' family took in the fugitives and gave them quarters for the nicht. They cam' ower here the next day to face the yerl, wha cursed and blackguarded them ; but kennin' he could do nae mair, though he lived to be a hunder, suffered them to tak' the high road, while he took the laigh.'

'I dare say he thought better of it, and was reconciled to his daughter in the end,' said Iris demurely; 'we are not so clever on our side of the Borders as you are on yours, Jeannie.'

* The celebration of marriages in private houses was then almost universal in Scotland.

‘So I hae heard say, mem. But the feck o’ the couples were mair crafty than to let it be touch and go like that; whiles they would come dressed up sae as their ain mithers could hardly hae kenned them, or they would travel here by opposite roads and at different times. The bridegroom by hissel’ or wi’ a frien’ would ride by a coach, and the bride would come, sometimes her lee-lane—eh! but she maun hae had a stout heart and a hantle faith in her lad—it micht be in the dead o’ nicht, by anither.’

‘And how did they do it, Jeannie? out of church, without a regular clergyman always. Did they never forget their prayer-books and the rings?’ pressed Marianne, with the keenest curiosity.

‘Prayer-books!’ cried Jeannie, her trim figure, in its dark-stuff gown, white cap and apron, swelling at the very word. ‘We haena had a service-book sin’ auld Jenny Geddes flung her stule at the head o’ the minister for dauring to pray in the kirk aff printed paper. As for the ring, it is but the bridegroom’s giftie to the bride; it can be given at ony time. Na, we’re no married wi’ rings.’

‘What are you married with then, in the name of wonder? Did you ever hear anything like it, Iris?’ cried Marianne, as at an incredible but surpassingly ludicrous joke. ‘I dare say you don’t vow to love, honour, and obey your husbands, when you take them for better, for worse?’

‘Na,’ said Jeannie again, with a canny sense of humour, ‘we say as little as we can, baith lads and lasses. Ye ken that least said is sunest mended. But there are waur husbands and wives than some you’ll find in Scotland, mem.’

‘I believe you,’ said Marianne. ‘I think you are a remarkable people, with charming institutions. If I ever marry, I’ll come and do it in Scotland. But in order that I may know what I’m about, you must tell me what really takes place, what you can find to say, when it can be said, in so few words, either in a church or a house, or a “doocot,” or wherever you may find yourselves.’

‘Weel,’ said Jeannie, slightly offended by the tone and the laughter, and defending herself with some dignity, ‘we dinna believe that the Lord’s confined to temples made wi’ hands. We think the earth is His and the

fulness thereof, and that His een are open to what's doing ower the whole world where ilka place is His temple. When all is richt and in order for a Scotch waddin', our minister puts up a bit prayer out o's head, and there's a sma' discoorse o' his own composition,' Jeannie explained with emphasis, as if she set great store on the originality of the performance. 'The discoorse may last for ten or twenty minutes; then there's another prayer at the end. But the ceremony itsel' which does the business needna tak' three minutes.'

'Then what on earth does it consist of? It sounds exceedingly like the waving of a magician's wand.'

'Na, there's nae magic aboot it. It's just the speerin' and answerin' o' twa reasonable questions. The minister, or it micht be anither man in a rinawa' marriage, asks the lad afore ane or twa witnesses, will he tak' this woman to be his lawfu' wedded wife, and he says "Yes," or he only boos if he's blate. Syne the minister speers at the lass if she'll tak' this man to be her lawfu' wedded husband, and she curtshies. Then the minister, or the man ackin for him, says, "Join hands,"

and the twa cleek their fingers thegither. Neist the minister or the man proclaims, "What God has joined letna man put asunder;" and that's a', unless the signing o' the lines that certifies the fac'.

'Do you mean to say you marry as an anonymous man and woman? Do you not even say "M" or "N"?' inquired Marianne, still full of interest and diversion.

'What's your wull, mem?' Jeannie questioned in her turn, using an ancient phrase which signified that she had not the most distant idea what her interrogator meant.

'It is not my will, it is yours, to marry in this odd mysterious fashion.'

'I beg your pardon, mem, but there can be nae mystery, or mockery either, about honest folk,' protested Jeannie indignantly. She felt strongly on such subjects as her nationality and her kirk, and had a settled conviction that she did well to be angry when they were attacked.

Iris interposed as a peace-maker.

'We only wished to know if you used no Christian name, such as Jeannie or Donald, in your marriage service.'

'Donald is a Hielant name,' said Jeannie

a little disdainfully. ‘We hae nae Donalds among our Lowland Scotch—ony way none hereawa on the Borders. Na, we mention no names ; at least we werena wont to bring them into the ceremony, though some new-fangled ministers say baith names, and would put it to me as Jean Maxwell, whether I would take Tam Riddel or Allan Elliot for my man ?’

Apparently Jeannie had not the guile to use assumed names for her illustration, since she coloured violently, and added that she did not think the new fashion ‘sae mannerly and modest’ as the old. ‘But there’s the mistress’s ring o’ the bell. She’ll say I’ve been claverin’ instead of minding my wark, and deed she’ll no be far wrang,’ cried Jeannie in self-condemnation, as she caught up her broom and dust-pan and made a hasty retreat to the door, before Marianne could call after her :

‘Say we kept you for the enlarging of our ideas. It is quite true, and she may put it in the bill.’

Marianne Dugdale was much struck and greatly enlivened by what she had heard of the runaway marriages, once of frequent

occurrence in the house, and of the simplicity of the ceremony of marriage according to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. She ran the two subjects together, and mixed them up inextricably in her mind, while she retailed the information she had got from the chambermaid, with great gratification, for the edification of the whole party. The topic was a promising one, full of sentimental interest, and yet fertile in jokes. Even the quietest and shyest person there, not to say the oldest, who was never behind with her joke, but as being a little of an invalid at present resigned herself to performing the part of a listener, could not resist expressing an opinion, and calling forth a laugh. But none was so full of the stories as Marianne Dugdale. Even after the girls had retired for the night she kept reminding Iris, ‘what throbbing temples and beating hearts must have sought refuge in these rooms! I wonder if no bride ever gave in at the last moment, fainted dead away, or said she would go back as she came, and try to be patient, and obey the law.’

‘A runaway marriage was not breaking the law—the law of the land, I mean—that went with the couple,’ said Iris. ‘I think,

like sensible Jeannie, that in extreme cases the remedy was open to trial. I have no doubt that the law existed for these, and to prevent weak women being hardly dealt with. It strikes me that there was a certain manliness and honesty in the law, though, of course, it might be much abused.'

'Of course,' echoed Marianne, without having paid much attention to what her companion had said. 'Don't you think it would be dreadful, horrible, to marry without love, Iris, even if the man were not a high-handed sinner, such as the girl described?'

Iris had never heard Marianne speak so seriously before, and even yet she was not sure that a jest might not lurk beneath the seriousness, till her cousin added in a tone of suppressed excitement :

'I would not do it for all the world ; I know it would be a terrible danger for me. It is another thing with you. I believe you would be good, and do your best under any circumstances. But I, Iris ; did it never strike you that there was something of—granny in me ?' Marianne broke off and asked in a low tone with a slight shudder,

but looking Iris full in the face all the time, as if to surprise her answer.

‘No, no, nothing at all,’ said Iris, startled and shocked, ‘except that it goes without saying we are both of her blood, and in some physical points—features, tones of voice, tricks of gesture, we may bear a resemblance to her, as doubtless we do to each other,’ added Iris, seeking to widen the chain of relationship to which she was referring.

‘Ah, I know better,’ said Marianne, drawing a long breath. ‘I am hot-blooded, impulsive, headstrong, as she has been. I, too, could be brought to stand at bay, and to break through every obstacle in the path of my will. I know I am a weaker woman than she is, but sometimes I think it is not only because hers is the stronger nature, but because I am really like granny, that she can turn and twist and make a tool of me. I see perfectly well what she is about all the time, how she is touching every sensitive spot in my composition, stirring me up and egging me on to be vain, heartless, and treacherous. But I cannot resist her—I defy myself to do it. It is the same as bringing fire to tinder. I kindle up in a blaze in a

moment, and become a puppet to be played off according to her pleasure. It is easy to guess what you will say, that I can strive, and watch, and pray to hold my own, but I am afraid I cannot. There is some sympathy between us. No, don't let us speak of it any longer, Iris, for even to allude to it in a whisper seems to make it a greater reality, and to render me more in her power.'

This impatient and, as it seemed, cowardly turning of Marianne's back on a cause for apprehension, with the avoidance of all present reflection and future resolution on the point, was a new practice to Iris Compton. She had faced each foe that stood in her path, whether or not she had been worsted in the contest.

But there was no room at this date for rational remonstrance with Marianne Dugdale. The moment her humour changed, which it was apt to do in the twinkling of an eye, she would put her small hands over her shell-like ears and call out pettishly she was not to be preached to, though she had just challenged and almost solicited the sermon. She would prefer to advance partially blind-

folded to threatened destruction, rather than endure the sharp pain, acute self-reproach, and mental trouble of opening her eyes, counting the cost, and making a determined stand and an abiding choice as to what was to be her conduct and fate. At the same time, poor little square-shouldered Marianne was far less unstable by nature than from defective training and untoward circumstances.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A RAINY DAY IN PERILOUS QUARTERS.

THE next morning rose with such a raw, white Scotch mist or drizzling rain as to catch everybody in the throat worse than her cold had caught Lady Fermor, and to forbid preliminary strolls and seats on the Border moors. The two young men tried them on several occasions, only to return thoroughly soaked, to be sent to the lower regions, where, as Marianne Dugdale declared, the pedestrians were turned before a slow fire: a process which afforded no comfort to the imprisoned ladies in the rooms above. Even in fine weather these moors are bleak in August, for the bloom of the broom is past, and the first purple of the heather is growing brown, before the burst of September red ling which lends the final glow to the wilderness. It was hard to be assailed

by the Scotch weather-fiend before the party had done more than set foot in Scotland.

Marianne Dugdale was crusty when she came down to breakfast in the inn parlour, where Lady Fermor sent Soames to pour out tea and play propriety at the table where the young people gathered.

‘Nobody shall say that I have not looked after you. After what I’ve seen and known, I trust nobody,’ the old lady told her nieces insultingly.

‘Very right, granny. We’ve all heard evil-doers are evil-dreaders,’ retorted Marianne recklessly, while Iris crimsoned and hurried out of hearing.

Marianne’s temper was not improved by a somewhat agitated announcement from King Lud that he must leave them and start by the night train. He had not heard from the Admiralty, but there were letters from the Rectory, where he ought to have been weeks before. The mother had been ill; and even without that obligation his last days on shore were due to those at home. They were too kind to complain, but he should not have failed them.

No, of course not. Good little boys could

not play truant for any length of time, Marianne told him scornfully, while she crumbled down the bit of oat-cake with which she had provided herself, but could not eat, and eyed superciliously the dish of newly caught trout. But how anyone could leave his friends in the lurch she could not understand, she went on tartly. It would have been bad enough to have deserted them before they had reached their destination, but it was mean to go in such weather.

He brightened up a little, and said earnestly: 'You must be aware I have no choice, Miss Dugdale.' And then the big, sandy-haired, full-faced lieutenant, the diver among sharks and the defier of polar bears, positively blushed like a girl, when he went on: 'But I may comfort myself—may I not?—with the selfish hope that I shall be missed—a little?'

'Not unless by Iris or Lady Fermor or Sir William,' Marianne assured him coolly. 'I never flatter a man's vanity. We can really get on very well without you—can we not, Sir William?'

'If you like to put it so, Miss Dugdale,' said Sir William a little awkwardly, and so

deliberately that Marianne could have shaken him, to have roused the man into greater alacrity. On second thoughts she decided that it would be a fine arrangement to force him to be on his mettle as her willing, engrossed servant for the day.

Ludovic Acton had deferred his departure till he should have to encounter the chill and darkness of midnight in such weather, in order—infatuated fellow—that he might have ten or twelve hours more to sun and scorch himself in the flame that was consuming him. Marianne proposed to repay him by rendering these hours one prolonged period of bitterness, till it was just possible the cruel cauterization of his wound might be complete and prove effectual, and the last boon be granted to him of departing limp and spiritless, but cured, if he were capable of cure, of a misplaced attachment to an unfeeling, ungrateful girl.

The prospect from the windows was not charming after the varied exercise and enjoyment of the past week. The bright red roses were shedding their petals, together with showers of tears, and were acquiring a cold purplish tinge in the process. The

honeysuckle dangled and dripped depressingly. Nothing was to be seen beyond a few yards, except a white seething sea of vapour, which seemed to rise in huge puffs of steam as well as to fall down in rain. It had begun by swallowing up respectively every morsel of Skiddaw and Scafell, Criffell and the Lead Hills. Nothing remained save the mist itself.

It was a blank, disconsolate day for belated travellers at a country inn, a day to order a smoky fire to be lit, draw the scanty curtains, and aim at the severe discharge of duty, and the acquisition of a rampant sense of self-righteousness, by writing off a dozen letters—long due; to collapse into calling for refreshments, yawning and dawdling and telling idle stories; to sour and ferment into quarrelling with might and main, and getting a little heat and vigour into life in that way.

Marianne tried none of these plans, for she did not deign to quarrel with King Lud; it was not her cue to dispute with Sir William, except in spurts of uncontrollable exasperation; she had a notion Iris would not wrangle with her, and Lady Fermor was not visible all the morning.

Marianne lugged Sir William into the passage to play battledore and shuttlecock by means of ancient implements for the game, which she had discovered in some corner, where they might have been kept in other years when the pastime was in the height of popular favour, and taken out on special occasions to divert the sorrows or fears of a childish bride, or to allay the restlessness of an excited bridegroom. But Marianne found that Sir William had to be taught, and though he insisted that he was good for rackets, he made no progress in catching and returning the mounted bunch of feathers. She sat down to backgammon with him, and found, to her disgust, that he could not only beat her to sticks, but did it without ceremony, with a wooden-headed adherence to the rules of the game, and a quiet grin of masculine superiority, which were beyond bearing. She rummaged out of her trunk silks and worsted, and set him to wind them for her, as Lady Thwaite had once done before. But either Sir William was now a more adroit master of the situation, or Marianne was not such an adept as Sir William's former employer in taking amuse-

ment out of her neighbour's blunders. Marianne asked her victim to read a guide-book aloud while she worked ; but he read, according to his custom, in a stentorian voice, so that everybody in the room had the benefit of the performance. It ceased to be private, as she had intended, and the publicity did not suit her, since she had a little weakness for monopolizing men's notice—a weakness which, with regard to Sir William Thwaite's attentions this day, had become an urgent necessity to her. In the end, between worry and the noise her squire made in obeying her last behest, her head began to ache violently. Then it became evident that poor Marianne was in a state of nervous weariness and crossness, which, to her extreme mortification, caused her to be viewed as an object of pity, rather than of reprehension.

There was more sorrow than anger in King Lud's kind eyes, and the sorrow smote Marianne Dugdale, so that she was barely able to persist in the line of behaviour she had adopted towards him and other people. She was extremely offended by Iris's offer of eau-de-cologne for her headache, the more so, perhaps, that Iris had been conversing

for the last three-quarters of an hour, in the most natural, unaffected manner certainly, but still on confidential terms, with Ludovic Acton, on scraps of Rectory news and on his probable destination when he should get a ship. Iris had no right to such information as Marianne had not cared to seek. It was setting her at nought for King Lud to vouchsafe to an old friend—in Marianne's very hearing, too—the details she had declined to listen to. To sum up the sufferings of Marianne's dog-in-the-manger mood, she began to grow frightened at Sir William, whom she had only looked upon as a temporary servant to suit her purpose. She had raised up a spirit with which she could not cope, and that she did not understand. His looks and tones had changed to rueful, unbounded forbearance and repressed tenderness, as she had known them change on the morning at the Academy. Marianne could not comprehend it, and her ignorance abashed her for the moment in her perversity. Iris believed that his heart was melting and thrilling because he was thinking of his dead wife, poor, wild Honor, who had paid by her early, untimely death for all wherein she

had offended him ; whom he had not made happy, save during the first few weeks of their short wedlock ; to whom, in the person of this capricious, captious, yet withal generous and warm-hearted girl, he might be called on in some sort to atone for his errors. What was he, or who cared for him, that he should decline to give up all that was left to him, in order that he might make the amends ?

And all the time Iris was as sure as she could be of the result of any human act, that if Sir William Thwaite were led on and suffered, by the contrivance of Lady Fermor and the folly of Marianne Dugdale, to accomplish the reparation which had more than once flashed across his mind, it would not only be a repetition of his former grievous blunder, it would be the consummation of the misfortunes of his chequered life.

Luncheon was welcome by way of variety, and still more dinner, with Lady Fermor declaring herself recruited in spite of the weather. She made no sign, if she observed the very visible dismemberment of the party, the discomposure of the individuals of whom it was composed, the heaviness, depression, and peevishness, as the effect of the rain, in

anticipation of the first break-up of the group of friendly associates by the departure of King Lud with the night train. Whether Lady Fermor were cognizant of the tokens or not, they did not augur a cheerful evening.

Appearances brightened, however, with coffee. Lady Fermor was at her best, chatty, with a rasping good-humour, inclined to encourage the young people in any form of diversion, though she still declared herself unfit for her usual game of cards.

‘But you boys and girls may set a-going games for yourselves. What games we had long ago, when we were not too wise or grand or goody-goody to play games! Old-fashioned, homely riddles and forfeits, when I was a very small child, charades, tableaux, not to speak of private theatricals for our own benefit, without any shoddy pretence of helping charities or entertaining paupers. Why, Marianne, are you so down in the mouth with one day’s rain that you cannot even get up a sham penny reading?’

There had been a reaction from Marianne’s exhaustion before this speech, a return to the restless excitement of the morning, deepened, as in the case of all relapses. But it was

Lady Fermor's goad which sent the girl beyond all bounds of discretion and delicacy.

'Thank you, granny, for the suggestion, which I'll take leave to improve upon,' cried Marianne, with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes. 'Ladies and gentlemen, we shall act one of the runaway marriages, for which this place was once famous. It will be a play in a single scene, and the words are so few that nobody need pretend not to be equal to learning his or her part.'

'Bravo!' exclaimed Lady Fermor, with the baleful fires in her sunken eyes leaping up for an instant; 'if you are able to carry out the idea. But who will bell the cat? Who will assume the principal parts, and play bride and bridegroom?'

'“I, said the sparrow,”' quoted Marianne, with an assumption of sparrow-like pertness, 'I will play the bride, and I choose Sir William for my bridegroom.'

It was a bold speech, and seemed to take the person most concerned by storm.

'How am I to thank you for your condescension, Miss Dugdale?' he said, with an agitation and seriousness which were startling, and caused even Marianne to look put

out and to pause for a moment in her recklessness.

‘Oh, by acting as well as you can,’ she said hastily. ‘I ask nothing further. I can coach you; I can coach everybody. I heard all about it from the maid. Somebody has to ask the bride and bridegroom if “Barkis is willin’?” and then we have only to say “yes” or “boo,” which seems to be letting us off by an easier method than speaking—even in a monosyllable. But what can “boo” mean? I understand, and am able to say “bo” to a goose’—with a fleeting, impatient glance at King Lud, sitting back in a corner, with a sudden lividness of cheek and lip, yet with the self-control of a gentleman and an officer. ‘But I confess “boo” beats me.’

‘It means “nod,” Marianne. Couldn’t you guess it by the corresponding word “curt-shey”?’ said Iris, speaking with an effort, as if she were forcing herself to join in the conversation. ‘But, if I were you, I would not bow to such a bad jest. I think you might find a better game.’

‘Oh, we are too demure to go through with a marriage even in a play,’ said Lady Fermor with suppressed rage, because her

opinion was disregarded. 'Or is it sour grapes, because the chief rôles are appropriated?'

'And the smallest and silliest of us can nod easily enough,' maintained Marianne, so that Iris was silenced.

Sir William glanced at her with a quick, disturbed inquiry ; but he could not read her face or her heart.

'Acton'—Lady Fermor turned ruthlessly to the lieutenant—'you are glum enough to play the owl or the parson ; you'll dig the grave—no, I did not mean that—you'll perform the ceremony.'

'Thanks, Lady Fermor'—he choked down his feelings—'but I am not qualified to take my father's place.'

'I'll teach you,' insisted Marianne flip-pantly ; 'you have only to utter three simple sentences. You ask whether the man will take the woman and the woman the man for husband and wife ; you bid them join hands, and then declare no power in heaven or on earth is ever to part them. Surely you can remember that.'

'Don't spoil sport, Acton,' enjoined Lady Fermor in her deep gutturals. 'We have no

substitute, unless we call in the innkeeper—honest man ! as they say in his country—and he may not be able to see a joke. You know you have to punch a hole in a Scotchman's head before you can get a joke into it. Never shirk what you've got to do, however much against the grain. I thought that was part of a sailor's creed.'

'So it is,' said the badgered man, raising his head and pulling himself together. 'I'll do what you want. Don't fear that I shall spoil sport, Miss Dugdale—Lady Fermor.'

'Are you all mad?' implored Iris ; but she spoke in a low tone, and nobody, unless Sir William, heard her.

'Be off, Marianne,' urged Lady Fermor, entering into the spirit of the unseemly frolic, as she had entered into many another of the same description. 'It won't be hard for you to dress in character, since there are no white silks or satins, or veils or orange-blossoms, required here. Your travelling-dress will do, and Thwaite need not change his coat. Your cousin Iris will not object to bring you in, and stay as a spectator, unless she holds that the bride's shoes are hers by prior right—is she so many months the senior or the

junior of the two? I forget which—and ought not to be filled by other feet. I'll arrange where the men shall stand.'

Marianne went out of the room, with Iris following her sure enough; but Iris did not overtake her cousin as she ran upstairs before the girl had passed Jeannie, the chambermaid smilingly making room for her. The young lady had a roguish whisper for her humble ally.

'Jeannie, I'm coming down again to be married. The house has not lost its spell.'

'Eh! Megsty me!' cried Jeannie, instinctively setting down the jug of hot water she was carrying for some gentleman's toddy, that she might not scald herself or any other person in the height of her excitement. But Miss Dugdale had already gone into her room, followed by the other young lady, looking 'that taken up' that she did not notice Jeannie.

In reality Iris was moved to the depths of her soul. The moment she was alone with her cousin Iris came out in a new character to Marianne. Iris went up to the little actress and poured forth, for her benefit, such a torrent of passionate upbraiding as the

gentlest lips will utter when the heart is stirred with poignant sympathy, and the honourable spirit outraged by what is unfair and ungenerous, when the meekest man or woman does well to be angry, and indignation is only the expression of truth.

‘How could you, Marianne Dugdale—how could you have the heart? You may not care for him a bit; but you see how he cares for you, and if you had any pity, any womanly feeling, you would spare him. It is only acting, of course, and there might be no great harm in that; but it is brutal—yes, brutal, to get up such a farce, knowing what he is suffering. I cannot tell whether you are making a fool of Sir William also; but you have no right to do that either,’ said Iris, holding up her head, and flushing rosy red. ‘He is a man who, though he is not much older than ourselves, has had great troubles and sorrows. The knowledge of that alone should keep the most thoughtless girl from harming him—perhaps in a way she cannot guess, and yet she may live to rue it. You are able to judge for yourself that, like many a greater man, he is simple and trustful in some things—where women are concerned, for instance—in spite

of having had his eyes opened roughly already. That, too, should be his shield against hardened raillery and coquetry. You are free and right to choose for yourself, and if you and Sir William Thwaite choose each other nobody need object ; all your friends must rejoice and wish you well. But to go trifling with Ludovic Acton, and torturing and shaming him at the last moment by this barbarous play, no good will come of it. I could never have believed it of you, Marianne.'

Iris ended, exhausted by her vehement defence of her friends and protest against wrong.

Marianne stared with big brown eyes, tried to laugh, turned away her head to hide her changing colour and drooping eyelids, and cried out ironically :

' Well, this is a tirade from a quiet-going young lady !' At last she sat down, crossed her arms, and faced her flushed, overcome accuser. ' So I don't care a straw for King Lud, and I have a sneaking kindness for Sir William, or rather for his place and title, I dare say. I am going to sell myself for a little rank and wealth, as thousands of girls

have done before me. That is the way of it—is it? Very creditable to me, and you ought to know me by this time. Never mind. Will you tell me just one thing, Iris? What business has Mr. Acton to go away in such detestable weather, as if to face the elements—in the rhetorical phrase—at their very dismalest is a great deal better than a comfortable enough inn with our company? He has no summons from the Admiralty, compelling him to start on the instant; he has to get up a story of his mother's being ill and wanting him, and it can't refuse it's mamsie's lightest whim, pretty dear!

‘Oh, Marianne! how can you be so horribly unreasonable and unkind!’ Iris said again with fresh wonder and wrath. ‘It is not why should Ludovic go, but why should he have stayed so long, in consideration of the little he has got for all he has given? He is a good son and brother, however little you may be capable of valuing such a character; and Mrs. Acton is a good mother, who would not grudge her boy his happiness, or make an outcry about her health for the purpose of recalling him. You cannot imagine how much he is thought of, how he is waited

and wearied for at the Rectory. And he is going to sea, where there are special dangers and deaths even for those who do not take their lives in their hands and risk them, at every opportunity, for their fellows, as our King Lud has risked his. He may never come back. I don't know that he cares at this moment, which is your doing. Before he knew you he had a happy and honourable life before him, and he loves his people, which you think to be rather a flaw in his character. To-day may be the last time we shall see him in this world—dear old King Lud! whom I have liked and respected, boy and man. How I should mourn for him! But how will you look, and what will you say, if you are told next winter or next summer that his ship has gone down to the bottom of the sea, like the *Captain* and the *Eurydice* and the *Atalanta*, and he has gone down to the depths with it, or that he has died far from home in some foreign hospital?

However she might look then, there could be no question as to how she looked now; she looked white as a sheet and trembled like an aspen, and what she said was the

strange outbreak: 'Yet he will give his mother the last word, the last look, which ought to be mine.'

Then she put up her little hand to her face, and

'Like summer tempest burst the tears,'

with which the girl had been battling since morning. The storm was as short-lived as it was violent, and even while Iris looked on in dismay at the effect of her words, the big drops ceased to rattle down, the chest left off heaving with sobs, while Marianne began to accuse herself piteously, passionately, laughingly, for extremes are always meeting. 'I am a wretch of a girl, and he's the dearest, best of fellows, as gallant a man as ever stepped, as true as steel, as tender as only the best men can be. And what did you take me for, that you could think I preferred Sir William Thwaite, who has risen in the world, and been wild, and is reformed, and is well enough in his way? But what drowning women did he save? What shipwrecked crew did he rescue? What torpedoes did he help to launch at the peril of his precious life — like — like Jove scattering thunderbolts?'

Iris looked up in sheer bewilderment at this extravagant laudation. She was tempted to put in the reservation : ‘ Where had he the opportunity, though he, too, fought and bled for his country ? And are there not spiritual conflicts and conquests harder and nobler by far than any physical warfare and victory ? ’ But she had not the chance, for it was Marianne’s turn to speak, and she was making abundant use of the privilege.

‘ There is one good deed I have done him, I have saved him from the consequences of an unworthy choice,’ she said, her voice, which had sounded shrilly eager and exultant an instant before, suddenly sinking in despair.

‘ No, Marianne. He does not think so ; he never will. I have known him since we were children. I know how hard it is to offend Ludovic Acton ; how lenient he is to offenders ; how sure to forgive,’ represented Iris earnestly.

‘ Yes, he will think he has made a fortunate escape after to-day,’ persisted Marianne dolefully. ‘ No man could bear what he has had to bear and forget it.’

‘ But you mean to make it up with him

before he goes ? You won't go on now with this stupid, coarse play, surely, surely, Marianne ?' besought Iris.

Marianne shook her head in wilful determination to suffer the worst penalty she had brought upon herself, and with a perverse doggedness which was characteristic of the girl : ' I cannot ; it is too late. It would make no difference now. Besides, we are not on terms to admit of an explanation, and I dare say he will be thankful in years to come that there never has been the ghost of an engagement, or even of a mutual understanding between us,' she said sadly. ' I would not let him speak, or grant him the least satisfaction. I did not wish to bring the game to an end by allowing him to commit himself, and by being forced to commit myself either way. It was a game in the beginning, though it has ended in earnest. Oh dear ! I liked it so much while it lasted—to feel my power, and know I could make everything bright or dark to him by a word, a look. It was dreadfully inconsiderate and selfish to him, no doubt, and I shall be punished as I deserve.'

Iris was altogether taken aback, though

she had not been without her suspicions, but she knew Marianne Dugdale too well to protest :

‘How could you have been so silly, so perverse, as to plague and grieve and do all you could to alienate the man you really cared for all the time? How could you seek to attract another man, and seem as if you, in your turn, were attracted by him, when, during your whole acquaintance, you were perfectly indifferent—in that way—to his merits and to all that was pathetic in his history?’

Where would have been the use in saying so, when Iris believed it had been, and might still be, quite possible that Marianne Dugdale, with the secret, violent fancy she had grown to entertain for the young fellow she had been domineering over and tantalizing, would consent, in a fit of pique and spleen, or mere sudden collapse and surrender to Lady Fermor’s evil influence, to marry the other man, for whom she had no fancy, and who had little better to offer her than a second-hand, remorseful pity?

What Iris did say was the evident truth, that Marianne would punish at least one

other person as well as herself, the innocent with the guilty. And Iris pled :

‘ Won’t you say, or let me say, that you have thought better of it, and cannot carry out this absurd, unbecoming mimicry of a marriage ? That will be some compensation to Ludovic before he goes, and he may understand—may suspect.’

‘ No, no,’ cried Marianne, starting up in a fresh access of wilfulness and waywardness, ‘ I am not going to crave mercy from any man, or seek to call him back. Besides, I am certain that granny would begin to jeer and taunt me till I became possessed, and then my last error would be worse than my first. Let us act the marriage and have done with the whole thing. I believe he has renounced me already in his heart ; let him have the comfort—the sop to his pride, poor fellow—of doing it in so many words. The circumstance that he can speak them before us all is a testimony which he may hug to the end of his days, because it will prove how fully he recovered from his delusion in time. After I have treated him as I have done, and gone so far, I owe him his revenge, and do you think I’ll stint him in it ?’

Marianne, in perfect sincerity, doubled in the argument, and twisted it round to make herself and everybody miserable in an ingenious fashion of her own, which is yet not altogether uncommon.

In any imminent danger in which Iris had ever seen a fellow-creature, her immediate strong instinct had always been to save the threatened victim—to save at Iris's expense, if need were—as when the girl controlled her natural recoil and held close the severed artery in her servant's wrist, as when she walked back to Whitehills with Lady Thwaite, dressed in a groom's clothes, and faced a man whom she had reason to know she had deeply offended, and whom all her friends and neighbours were then denouncing as a drunken ruffian. The instinct did not fail to assert itself at this juncture.

‘Let me act the bride,’ she said with quiet determination. ‘It will be all the same who takes the part in a piece of child's play that neither Sir William nor I need mind, and it will save you and Ludovic Acton from a last misunderstanding, which, though it is only about a silly joke, may separate you for life.’

Marianne hesitated, with changing colour and parted lips. Her susceptible pride and fiery temper had been up in arms a moment before. She had forbidden a compromise, yet she might snatch at a reprieve. Her decision would be very much a matter of chance, as were many of the resolutions she formed in her honest but unregulated mind—even when they were on subjects of vital importance to her—taken on the spur of the moment, at haphazard, and under the influence of trifles light as air.

In the meantime Iris, awaiting Marianne's answer, frightened to look at her for fear of influencing her, looking on the floor instead, was calling King Lud her brother in her heart, and remembering all that his family had done for her—Iris Compton. She was thinking of Marianne's affectionate championship soon after they had become acquainted, and what a different world it had been to a lonely girl when she had found a bright, frank, young companion, generous and lovable even in her transparent follies, constantly by her side. Iris was thinking of Sir William and the debt he had already paid to Lady Fermor, and the other debt he had paid to

Honor. Iris's mind was even recurring to old stories and old wrongs in which her ancestor had been the wrong-doer and Marianne Dugdale's the sufferer of the wrong.

‘What an excellent idea!’ cried Marianne suddenly. ‘You can play the bride, as you say, as well as I. They will not suppose that I have drawn back—only that we have agreed to change places. Indeed, as our hats and travelling-dresses are alike, and the light is none of the best, if we had not been so different in height, they might not have known the one from the other,’ she ended with a little uncertain laugh, beginning to recover her courage and spirits. ‘I wonder if he will give a great start and gape, forget all I told him, and not be able to proceed with the ceremony? Won't he look dreadfully foolish? But I shall not have vexed him—the very last thing. Iris, it was taking a despicable advantage of me to work upon my feelings and pretend he would not come back safe and sound—a great, strong, fearless fellow like King Lud, twice as big as our boys at home, with a face like a full moon. Yes, indeed, it is true; but I hate small faces

in men ; I think they cannot be too big every way. He has so often gone away, and always returned like a bad halfpenny. I wonder how and when we shall meet next,' melting into tenderness, but rushing off at a tangent the next moment. 'He can never be so base as to forget "the girl he left behind him." Remember, I shall be fit to kill you if he should jilt me, after what you have made me tell you. In the meantime I'll play that tune, in my own honour, every day that I can reach a piano, till he come back. Must he stay away months? A whole year or more? The man should not have made me so accustomed to his tiresome ways. How will the time pass without them? Shall I grow sick with hope deferred? And do all the girls in my position complain of the cruelty of the Queen and the Lord High Admiral? Who would have said I should be a spoon? How our boys would laugh, and even Cathie and Chattie would giggle. But they shan't know a syllable till he is a captain, and able to propose for me to granny or papa in due form. I suppose that will not be till he has made a pot of money, poor fellow, to keep me with; but, if the ruling

powers continue long obdurate, we'll know what to do ; we'll run straight away to Scotland. Then we'll have to go into sea-side lodgings, and be careful of our coals, and never allow ourselves an extra pair of boots. Will you still acknowledge us, Iris ? You ought to, for you have been at the bottom of the mischief—even though granny has nothing more to say to us. By the way, we must not keep her waiting any longer. She will not stand the further delay of this marriage.'

Iris was hardly listening now as they proceeded to put on their travelling jackets and hats of brown tweed, with which they had provided themselves in preparation for what they had been pleased to consider the Arctic climate of Scotland.

'What a dress for a bride !' cried Marianne, in lively disgust.

'But it is a runaway bride,' said Iris.

'Yes, but depend upon it if she ran away of her own accord, she had some respect for her own feelings and those of her bridegroom, and put a bridal touch somewhere to her dress. Besides, my dear child, there must be something to mark the difference between

us—in our parts. Here, take this bunch of wet roses—I dare say they are the descendants of bridal roses—which Jeannie brought me from the kailyard. Roses are later in the north than in the south; we are not travelled girls, so we may speak of Scotland and England—all we know—as north and south. Fasten the flowers in your jacket.'

Iris did as she was bidden to please Marianne, and get the sooner done with the foolish play. The couple hurried downstairs arm-in-arm, and entered the room so abruptly that it was not difficult to picture an angry father at their back.

Somebody had drawn a table before the corner where Ludovic sat, looking grim. Sir William was standing beside it with a curious mixture of affront—as if doing something preposterous—and wistful yearning and pain in his face.

Lady Fermor sat still in the chair which she had before occupied, but she must have rung for Soames in order to enable her maid to enjoy the little entertainment, for the long lank functionary was ranged behind her mistress's chair.

The room was dark from the state of the

weather and the old-fashioned little windows ; besides, the company were not quick enough to take up at once the cue of the roses with which Marianne had obligingly supplied them. Iris had volunteered to act her part, and was doing what she needed to do with a growing reluctance which became so nearly insupportable that she could not stop to think what she was about, but must hasten through it, behaving like a creature in a dream.

Marianne took the initiative, as she was always disposed to do. She walked straight up to Sir William. There she paused for a second. In truth, she was not at all clear how the office of giving away a runaway bride was performed in the strange Scotch marriage. She was afraid Jeannie had forgotten something. Marianne had to use her own judgment ; she wisely confined herself to dumb show. She simply dropped Iris's arm and retreated, leaving her cousin standing by Sir William.

King Lud leant forward confounded, yet eager as at an unlooked-for release from a piece of sport which had galled him like a wanton insult, a real irreparable injury.

Lady Fermor put up her hand to her eyes, as if to clear her sight, and let it fall again, sitting upright, with her eyes glittering, and nodding her head, as if she were the person called upon to bow her consent.

Sir William flushed scarlet, and looked, like a man driven wild, from one to the other. He could read nothing in Iris's little face ; it was blank, like that of one forcing herself to stifle every warring inclination and go on with an ordeal.

‘Proceed with the marriage, Mr. Acton ; there is the bride,’ muttered Marianne *ex officio*, with a little quiver, partly of laughter, partly of another feeling, in her voice.

Ludovic Acton started up to obey his mistress's behest, while life was once more opening out before him with hope and love and joy among its possibilities. Why had he been such a fool ? How could he have been so taken in, to torture himself as he had done ? This acting a marriage was nothing, the merest jest, when Marianne Dugdale was not to play the bride to another bridegroom than himself. It was no worse than fifty charades and *tableaux vivants*, in which he had taken part. If it had been so,

Iris Compton, good little Iris, whom he knew so well and could depend on entirely, would not have been in it. He stood behind the table facing Sir William and Iris, and tried to respond to Marianne's appeal, and to do credit to what she had told him when he had utterly mistaken her intention. He looked imploringly at her for inspiration, instead of at the pair before him. He sought to recall the sentences she had repeated to him. If he made a verbal mistake it would be forgiven in an actor who had only once heard his part.

‘Will you take this woman for your wife?’

Marianne, who had drawn nearer the couple, turned prompter again—this time on behalf of Sir William—with the pantomime of an emphatic nod; but he took them all by surprise, speaking out distinctly and so loudly as to sound roughly, ‘I will.’

‘Will you take this man for your husband?’

‘Boo, or “curtshey,” Iris,’ whispered Marianne mischievously. Iris smiled slightly, as at a dimly apprehended, far away bit of fun, and inclined her head.

The impromptu parson looked despairingly at Marianne, who in answering despair

clasped her hands, shaking her head reproachfully at the same time.

‘Join hands,’ cried Ludovic.

Sir William put out his hand and grasped Iris’s in so tight a clasp that it half roused her. She made a little motion to draw her crushed fingers away. He was the better actor of the two certainly, but he overacted his part. Iris was so far recalled to herself that she became aware of a stir at the room door. Glancing in that direction she saw, to her vague distress, it had been left open and pushed slightly ajar, and that there was quite a group of people on the threshold, the most of them seeking to see without being seen. Jeannie, the chambermaid, formed one bashful spectatress; another gazer was the landlord, a thick-set, shock-headed man, who still wore mine host’s conventional red waistcoat. But he was not skulking, whatever his companions might be; he held a candlestick with a lit candle in his hand, for the rainy gloaming was fast deepening into mirk. He looked excited, as if he wanted to come in and either interfere with the performance or join in it.

Apparently Lady Fermor had also detected

the intruders, for she called out, 'There, that will do!' and sure enough the group melted and vanished, pulling the door close behind them. But her ladyship, who was in high glee, might not so much intend to give a reprimand as to say the scene had been sufficiently represented; for she added immediately afterwards, addressing her own party, 'We need not mind signing the register or the bride's "lines."' Upon my word, it has been a very pretty wedding. Let me congratulate you, Thwaite and Iris—that is my part of the performance, and a very pleasant part it is, I can tell you. You have given us a good notion of what a runaway marriage is like. I suppose, Iris, you thought, after all, you were the fittest match for the bridegroom.'

The hands so lately joined had already dropped asunder. Sir William remained standing alone by the table, as if he were trying to reason with himself, to get rid of a momentary hallucination, to cast off a disordering, maddening impression. He did not go near Lady Fermor. He hardly suffered himself to throw a look after Iris as she rejoined Marianne.

‘How stupid you were, Mr. Acton,’ Marianne accused King Lud. ‘It was I, not you who married them. I must ask Jeannie if that is correct, and if a woman can marry a couple in this improper little Scotland.’

Iris left the room with Marianne to put off their out-of-doors habiliments. As the girls did so, the roses fell unheeded from Iris’s jacket on the floor, and would have lain there to be trampled under foot if Sir William had not stepped forward, stooped, and picked them up.

When the cousins came back, the subject of the acted marriage was dropped as if by common consent. The talk had turned upon the lieutenant’s departure, the hour for which was drawing near. He had engaged a trap from the innkeeper to take him through the rain and darkness to the nearest station, a few miles off. He was far brighter and more animated than he had been all the day, while Marianne Dugdale, on the contrary, became somewhat silent, only emitting an occasional little jet of contradiction and sauciness. He announced confidently that he expected to see them all again before he sailed, and nobody deprived him of the hope, and forbade

him the privilege. If he wrung Marianne's hand in saying good-bye, nobody could see and censure the deed, since she did not wrench her fingers away; for that matter she had not flouted him for the last five minutes, but if she cried herself to sleep and bemoaned her former perversity and cruelty, it was in the silence and solitude of her room.

Iris thought it was charity to everybody to adopt Lady Fermor's early hours this night. A sudden sobriety which was almost oppressive, the natural result of contending emotions and of King Lud's going, had fallen upon the young people. As for herself, she desired nothing better than to be able to recall undisturbed the whole events of the day, including the grotesque farce in which she had been involved. When she had thought it all over, she would dismiss it from her mind at once and for ever.

The dismissal was not quite so easy as Iris had anticipated. She felt haunted by the foolish play; she tossed on her bed sleepless and feverish. When she did drop asleep, she dreamt she had married Sir William Thwaite in earnest without intending it; and

what was worse, she had not asked his leave, and he had not spoken one word or given a single glance, in renewal of his passionate love-making and proposal to her in the hay-field at Whitehills four years before. Nay, he had seemed at every crisis to turn—with whatever mixed motives—to Marianne Dugdale.

At last Iris slept soundly ; but even then she was disturbed by the business of the inn, or by the figments of her own imagination. She thought she heard some one calling her name loudly and urgently, and when she started up in bed and listened and failed to distinguish a voice speaking to her, she seemed to hear the noise of wheels driving rapidly from the door.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BEAST RISES UP A PRINCE.

IRIS slept late after a troubled night, and when she awoke and looked at her watch she could take nothing into account save that she had been shockingly lazy, though the sun was shining brightly enough after the rain to tempt all exemplary travellers to be up and abroad on unfamiliar ground. Iris grudged losing the bright morning, and she grudged still more keeping Marianne Dugdale, Sir William Thwaite, and Soames hanging about till she should choose to appear for breakfast. She had no time to spare for more than the general confusion with which the incidents of the past day—especially if they have been of an unusual character and crowded together—are apt to present themselves to people on their first awakening from a few hours' welcome oblivion.

Iris for once took refuge in self-evasion, for she had a half-formed notion, after her dim, partly remembered dreams, that she too had acted rashly and foolishly in what had passed, though it was no more than in being guilty of an appearance of evil in yielding to figure in an indiscreet, not too delicate parody of a solemn service. She might well feel provoked and mortified by discovering that she had put herself, unless her companions were considerate and forbearing—and when had Lady Fermor been either the one or the other?—in an awkward, embarrassing position? It was not to be thought that nobody—Marianne in her thoughtlessness, Lady Fermor in her malice, even Sir William in some blundering fashion—would ever allude to the rainy day at the inn on the Borders, and the amusement to which the party had resorted in order to spur on the lagging hours. If such allusions were made, how was Iris to look; what was she—or, when it came to that, what was Sir William—to think?

When Iris ran downstairs, half unwilling to face her companions, and yet eager to have the meeting over, she believed she

was later than she had suspected. The maid Jeannie, standing at one of the doors on the landing, withdrew into the room as if ashamed for Iris's credit to encounter her at such an hour, and unwilling to detain her, while another servant, Iris fancied, looked at her with tittering significance.

But what was Iris's surprise when she entered the inn parlour and found it empty, with breakfast only laid for one ! She rang the bell in a little trepidation, for she was conscious that Marianne was capable of playing her a trick, though Iris considered it would be especially unkind and undeserved this morning.

As another instance of the unexpected happening, the landlord chose to wait in person, bringing in the dish of trouts as his excuse for his presence. 'Where are the others?' Iris inquired, without waiting for the departure of the single rustic young waiter, who was also favouring her with his attentions, and showing no hurry in depositing and arranging the tea and coffee service so as to satisfy a scrupulous taste. 'Have they all breakfasted and gone out ? I am afraid I am very late ;' and Iris tried

to smile instead of feeling absurdly disconcerted.

The landlord did not hasten to answer her with civil fluency. He began staring at her in silence. 'Do you not know, miss, they are gone?' he said at last, cautiously.

'Gone!' exclaimed Iris, not able to believe her ears. 'Ah! for a morning's excursion, I suppose,' she took heart to exclaim. 'But Lady Fermor never drives out before luncheon, and Mrs. Soames cannot have left her.'

'The leddy and her maid and the other young leddy went first,' said the landlord with precision. 'The gentleman only left about an hour syne.'

'An hour ago?—that was still early. What could influence Lady Fermor to go out even earlier? Where have they gone? When are they coming back?' cried Iris, in unrestrained bewilderment.

'That I cannot take it upon me to say, miss—you should know better than me. But I apprehend you're in error on one point. You seem to think all your party went the same gate, nigh hand together?'

Iris nodded, her tongue refused its office.

The man looked a respectable man, and was respectful enough in his manner, but the wariness with which he conducted the conversation was remarkable, and there was in his tone the slightest shade of irony not unmixed with dry humour—if she could have recognised it—and a degree of perplexity. It was as if he suspected her—while he was haunted by a doubt—of still playing a part, and had no objection to let her see he suspected her.

‘Now, you’re wrang there, begging your pardon. First there was the young gentleman who took the trap to catch the last train overnight, but I think you were with the four when he set out. Syne, not long past the sma’ hours, between four and five o’clock, when the rain was still spittin’, afore the inn was richt astir, the auld leddy sent for me and but to be aff to meet the first train, though it was a fell-like fatigue for a woman at her time of life. Her body-woman was dressed and ready like her mistress, but the young leddy seemed laither to quit her pilly. She did not come down till the chaise was at the door, and then she made such a collyshangie calling out for somebody after she

was in the carriage, and wanting to stop and go back, that she was like to wauken the whole house. But the auld leddy maistered the lassie—that I should speak so unmannerly—and drove off in spite of her. Lastly,’ and mine host looked still more curiously at Iris from under his eyebrows, ‘there was the titled gentleman, who did not appear to have been disturbed any more than yourself, miss, for he just came quietly down at his usual hour. It was only after he found that so many of the party were gone that he wrote a letter or two in haste—sending off one by a messenger—asked for a time-table, and left to meet the mid-day train. He did not speak to me of coming back when he paid his share of the bill—what was left after the auld leddy cleared the score—though he may have mentioned it otherwise, as it is what one would expect,’ the speaker observed meditatively. ‘However, he left a bit parcel for you in my hands,’ the innkeeper went on briskly, as if the truth might lie in this nutshell, extracting a small packet from his waistcoat-pocket and placing it ostentatiously before Iris; ‘and it need be no secret that it was he wrat one of the letters which were left for you that I

jalouse you have not seen.' He bustled to bring two letters from where they were stuck conspicuously in a card-rack on the chimney-piece, and laying them on her plate, left her at last with evident reluctance and disappointment at her reticence. In any other circumstances Iris would have been amused by the worthy man's inquisitiveness, and by the mingled shrewdness and simplicity with which he betrayed that he had been speculating on her affairs, and putting two and two together in order to bring out the sum of them to his satisfaction. But she was far past such amusement. She sat for a moment before opening the letters, staring at them mechanically with a stunned sensation. The one was in her grandmother's big, blurred, shaken handwriting; the other displayed the square upright characters which Sir William Thwaite's pen was wont to produce.

Iris tore open her grandmother's letter first. It contained only a few lines :

' DEAR IRIS,

' I am glad you have come to your senses at last, though I must own you took

me—and I presume more than me—by surprise. However, when that person was perfectly agreeable, there is no more to be said. All's well that ends well. As I think you and Sir William had better be left to yourselves like other young fools, for your honeymoon, I have taken myself and Marianne Dugdale off with the greatest expedition. You ought to give me credit for my youthful activity. I trust to see you whenever you go to Whitehills, and I have returned to Lambford.

‘ I remain your affectionate grandmother,

‘ MARIANNE FERMOR.

‘ P.S.—As Scotch marriages properly attested, which yours can easily be, are quite legal, if I were you and Thwaite I should not put myself to the trouble and expense of a re-marriage with the benefit of clergy, favours, and cake, and a crowd of idle on-lookers. In fact, these re-marriages are often great mistakes, mere sources of confusion and misconception; so the less you have to do with them, in my opinion, the better; but please yourselves.

‘ M. F.’

Here at least were basest betrayal and desertion ; whether premeditated or the instant relentless improvement of an unfortunate opportunity for gaining an end and paying back the opposition to an imperious will, Iris could not tell, then or ever. She thrust back the paper with trembling fingers into the envelope. As she turned it over she first looked beyond the handwriting, and read the address. It was to—

‘ *Lady Thwaite,*
Of Whitehills.’

She flung down the letter as if it stung her. While she did so a vision of Honor, who had last borne the title, rose before her. Poor Honor, who had so scandalized the public, had she ever acted more imprudently, or felt so degraded and disgraced as Iris did upon this miserable morning ?

Iris read the address of the other letter before she opened it, and it gave her a grain of comfort, for it bore the familiar direction to Miss Compton.

‘MADAM,’ Sir William must have written first in his massive letters, then he had

squeezed in 'Dear' at the edge, as if conscious, on reading over the note, that he was warranted, nay, bound in exchange of confidence, to use the friendly prefix in cold blood,—'I am confounded by Lady Fermor's unexpected departure. I feel that she has taken a gross advantage of you, by representing in another light what I can never presume to regard as anything more than your having been induced to lend your countenance to a frolic of Miss Dugdale's. Perhaps Lady Fermor means this last act as something of the same kind; but a frolic which I am sorely afraid must inconvenience and distress you for the time, is too much of a good thing. I have come to the conclusion that the best I can do for your relief is not to stay here a moment longer. I will go away instantly and await your pleasure elsewhere. Perhaps I had better stop at Dumfries, in place of following Lady Fermor to Moffat. It sounds too much that you should wish to write to me, but if it is necessary, I shall get the letter at the post-office there. You have done so much for me and mine in the past, that I think you will do me the justice of believing that I

would die rather than vex you—far less intrude upon and insult you.

‘Your obedient servant,

‘WILLIAM THWAITE.’

Here was no treachery, and if she were forsaken the deed was done out of manly, grateful, jealous care for her best interests—as a faithful brother would shield his sister. It was clear that the letter had been written in agitation and with anxious pains, no less than with earnestness of purpose. The strong characters had not faltered; but there were erasures, as if he had found difficulty in expressing himself.

Iris was both comforted and troubled by the letter—comforted that her old friend, as she had come to consider him, was not destined to fall lamentably in her estimation by becoming her deadliest foe. On the contrary, he was as innocent as herself, and he was judging wisely and acting truly in the painful dilemma into which they were both brought by Lady Fermor’s wicked will and their own weakness. The foolish trouble which darkened this ray of comfort was for the most part a selfish, vain trouble, as Iris

told herself with some bitterness. Still, however inconsistent, she could not help wasting a regret on the complete dispelling of old associations, the conviction of the utter extinction of his early feelings for her. His love had not appeared wise or suitable, or even seemly to her—nobody had felt that more strongly than she herself had felt it in those days. Still the knowledge of the destruction, root and branch, of the old desperate regard, cost her a pang. Moreover, it would be grievous for him if he had learnt to love, too late and in vain, Marianne Dugdale, on whose share in the recent cruel proceeding he had not cast a shadow of blame.

But there was another communication from Sir William besides the letter, which he had possibly intended to be all, till something had occurred to him at the last moment that had caused him to turn, make up the packet, and entrust it to the landlord. When Iris unfastened the paper she stared at the contents stupidly for a moment, while her colour went and came in mute amazed protest. He had enclosed two ten-pound notes—probably the greater part of the money he had about him

—in a cover, on which he had written in pencil: ‘Will you do me the honour to accept this loan in case you should want it?’

‘In case she should want it!’ as she read the sentence, she realized the truth fully for the first time. She had been left behind, abandoned in what the people of the house might well view as compromising circumstances, a young woman alone in a strange inn, on the borders of a strange country. And whether she should determine to follow her grandmother, upbraid her with her barbarity and insist on her undoing her part of the play; or whether she should attempt the return journey by herself over more than half the length of England to seek the protection of Mrs. Haigh; or to throw herself on the old friendship of the Actons at the Rectory—her slender purse would have been unequal to the demands either of the shorter or the longer expedition, since Marianne Dugdale, having spent her own quarter’s salary, had freely borrowed from Iris. She would have been without the means of paying her expenses in any direction had it not been for the humanity of Sir William Thwaite.

Iris felt humbled and distracted, unable to

fix what she should do, yet aware that she must do something without loss of time. She tried to swallow her breakfast as the first necessary task to be performed. Then she, too, studied the time-bill, but shrank unconquerably from the possibility of encountering Sir William at the little wayside station. The landlord had spoken of the mid-day train; apparently not many trains stopped at this out-of-the-way junction, and he might not be gone by the time she reached the place.

As she began to recover from the blow and her natural presence of mind and power of resource returned to her, it struck her that the obviously sensible course for her to pursue was to stay where she was, till she had contradicted to the people of the house the false impression they had received. Some of them, from whatever cause, had been witnesses to the carrying out of the ill-timed jest—in keeping with the old reputation of the house. The natives of the place were well acquainted with this reputation, in which they took a shamefaced pride. The misconception of the inhabitants was deepened by their knowledge that irregular, but at the same time lawful, marriages could still be

performed within their precincts, as for that matter within the entire bounds of Scotland. Above all, their credulity was imposed upon by the coarsely cruel conduct of Lady Fermor.

As Iris reflected, her courage and even her spirits, though they had been greatly tried, revived a little. In spite of the outrageous interpretation which Lady Fermor had chosen to put upon the story, it was simply preposterous. Nobody could treat it seriously for a moment. Neither the pretended bride nor bridegroom was in earnest, and as little was King Lud who spoke the words, or Marianne Dugdale who prompted them. She was at the bottom of the practical joke, and yet she had strangely, though not without protest, according to the innkeeper, gone over to the enemy. Of course no reasonable person could attach the slightest importance to the scandal.

Iris did not suffer her heart to fall before the disheartening recollection of the limited number of reasonable persons in the world, and the sorrowful comprehension that the bare breath of the most incredible scandal is baleful, even where the sins of the fathers are not visited on the children.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAW OF THE LAND.

THE landlord had appeared to lay himself out for Iris's confidence, but he had not uttered his suspicions in so many words. Iris had not inherited her grandmother's propensity of invariably choosing men for her advisers. It would be doubly disagreeable for Iris to try to make a man measure the extent of the late piece of folly—as mere folly. Yet she wanted a mouth-piece to tell it to all who would listen. Her security lay in the immediate publication of the truth, and her inclination pointed to the bright yet douce girl Jeannie, who had spoken only too graphically and amusingly of the Border marriages to the English young ladies.

Iris, walking restlessly about the room, saw from the end window Jeannie, in her morning calicot wrapper, linen apron and bare arms,

carrying a great basketful of wrung-out clothes to spread over a washing-green. Iris took a swift resolve to go out and talk to the girl and tell her the truth, which she would surely convey to her master and mistress.

As Iris traversed the rambling passages of the old house and sought the way to the washing-green, she was oppressed by the consciousness of having become the centre of attraction to her neighbours, while they openly or covertly looked at and watched her. This knowledge when it mingles in any transaction of life, whether joyful or sorrowful, lends a strange unreality to the affair, and gives to the performers in the true drama a double sense of being at once the veritable persons who are passing through a glad or miserable crisis in their history, and at the same time actors on a stage, playing, whether they will or not, for the benefit of onlookers.

Iris found Jeannie busily employed on a haugh or strip of meadow by the side of one of those rapid, white and brown, brawling streamlets, 'the bonnie burnies,' with their endless songs, which are among the chief delights of the North country. Though the

brook was swollen by the rains of yesterday, so that every slippery stepping-stone was covered, and its clear water rendered turbid, yet it did its best to flash in the sunshine and 'jouk' round each corner.

Jeannie glanced up from her occupation and made one of the 'curtsheys,' which, unless in remote country places, and among very primitive people, form now the depth of respectful greeting reserved solely for royalty.

Iris had grown nervous, or else Jeannie was really shyer than she had been before, and the single look which she gave was not directed so much to the visitor's face, as to her uncovered left hand. Was Jeannie looking in vain for that 'bit giftie' of a wedding-ring, which, though it plays no part in the Scotch marriage ceremony, is always bestowed as the first token from the husband to the wife, and in this light is regarded as a proof of marriage and universally worn, till death, in Scotland as well as in England?

'Oh! what a miserable day it was yesterday, Jeannie!' began Iris, referring to the weather.

'Did you think sae, my leddy?' inquired

Jeannie, as if there could be two opinions on the subject, while she completed laying out a row of towels on the grass.

‘Did you not think so? Have you so much worse weather?’ Then Iris added hastily, with regard to the changed form of address which Jeannie had used, that had struck the listener’s roused ear, ‘But I’m not “my lady”; only my grandmother, the old lady who left early this morning, is entitled to be spoken to in that way.’

‘As you like, mem,’ said Jeannie slowly and doubtfully. ‘You should ken best; it is for you to tak’ your choice how you’re to be ca’d. For the weather, weel, whiles we’ve deep snaw in the winter, and sleet as late as April, and rain—no’ drizzlin’ but poorin’ in buckets-fu’, with spates in the burn till it rins ower a’ the haugh, and the beasts are flooded in the byre and the stable, and we’re keepit in the hoose for twa or three days at a time. But I was meaning that it is often the mind that makes the weather to folk; the sun will be shinin’ for some when there’s nocht but cluds for others—div you no think sae, mem? In that case yesterday michtna hae been sae dowie a day to you.’

Jeannie, in spite of her momentary bashfulness, was not unwilling to approach the subject Iris wished to discuss. In fact, the girl was dying to pick up some crumbs of information if the young lady would drop them. The whole house was on the alert in reference to the supposed marriage which had taken place, and in addition to Jeannie's craving for a share in an exceptional and half-forbidden experience, the friendly heart pitied 'the bonnie young leddy, left her leelane the day after her marriage, by her very man.' This was the great and not to be admired eccentricity in the proceedings, which more than the failure to summon Long Fernie or a substitute to tie the knot, and so keeping the business strictly among the party themselves, had puzzled and exercised the minds of the inn household, and of such boarders and customers as were privileged to be privately informed of the occurrence. It was not unusual for the bride or the bridegroom expectant to make their entrances on the scene separately, as Jeannie had told Iris and Marianne, but it had been the good old custom that they should make their exit in company.

‘Yesterday was dowie, if that means unhappy, to me, Jeannie,’ admitted Iris, with tears in her eyes; ‘and I am bemoaning it at the present moment, though I trust it will not be for long.’

‘Gude forefend, mem!’ Jeannie said so solemnly that Iris felt she must beat about the bush no longer.

‘What do you think we were so tired of ourselves and of everything else, and so silly as to do, yesterday, in the gloaming?’

‘I think I ken, mem,’ said Jeannie, with a slightly reproachful accent. It appeared to her that Iris was not approaching the subject in a proper spirit; it seemed as if the young lady were seeking to make out that there had been no set purpose and important reason why her party, which had dispersed so rapidly, had come together to the Borders. She was trying, from what motive it would be hard to say, to throw dust in Jeannie’s wide-awake eyes, and pass off an incredible version of the story on a lass who had heard all about the grand old runaway marriages from her grandmother and her father and mother, who had herself seen humble, discreditable editions of the originals. More

than that, Jeannie had been told something of what was going to take place by the other franker young lady. Then the servant-girl had rushed off and informed her master and mistress, as in duty bound. Afterwards she had gone back with them and others and stood at the door of the room, and had heard and seen the couple take each other for man and wife, and join hands before witnesses in due form, till the old lady, who did not look offended either, put an end to the spectacle.

Jeannie was 'ill-pleased' by what struck her as levity on the part of Iris, by her trifling with the truth, to which she, Jeannie, could swear, if need were. She commenced re-wringing the drops of water from the next towel with all the strength she possessed. As she did so she said something plainly, to show she would not be taken in; for why need the bride come to Jeannie and pretend to confide in her, if the young lady was to begin by speaking deceitfully?

'The ither miss telled me as she passed me on the stair that there was going to be a marriage—I thocht she said she was going to be married hersel', but I maun hae ta'en her up wrang. An' I telled the maister, as I

behoved to do, and him and me and ithers in the house stood at the door and saw the waddin'. I may hae ta'en a liberty, mem, but I did ye nae wrang, for there was naebody pursuing to track you, and the mair witnesses the better for you and yours. It is only when the couple is like to be caught in the act, or when there's mischief in the wind, that sic a business is done hidlins.'

'But, Jeannie, there was no marriage,' insisted Iris. 'We were all in jest; we were only making a little play out of your marriages.'

'Dinna tell me that grown-up men and women, educate leddies and gentlemen, would play sic a fule trick here!' cried Jeannie incredulously, and well-nigh disdainfully.

She took up a pillow-case, and, holding it up high, shook it as if in protestation, till she brought down a shower of glistening drops upon her brown hair and ruddy face. Then she dropped her bare brown arms by her side and said severely :

'It's nae matter o' mine if ony titled leddy likes to lee—I beg your pardon, mem, I micht hae fund a safter word, but I'm no

used to cringing ony mair than to dooble tongues. My folk's a' honest and steady, though they're only puir working men and women, no sae muckle as a runawa' marriage after a feein' market amang the whole lot o' us, as the minister kens. I put it to you, mem—my leddy, I should say,' Jeannie corrected herself with malicious punctiliousness, 'though it may not be your wull to tak' your title for a time—how can I or onybody in his or her senses credit that you were a' daffin' wi' ane anither at a wild game? It was hardly fit for bairns, though it could be said for them, for ae thing, they wouldna ken its danger. But, if you were just wilin' awa' the close o' a rainy day, what for did the lave o' the players melt awa' at aince like a snaw-ba', and gang their wa's here and there, and leave you and anither to bear the wyte? Weel-a-wat it would hae been but richt and kind if he had bidden still to bear his new-made wife company; however, there's an odds in the manners o' gentle and simple, and he may hae gone on a richt gude errand, and be back again like a shot,' continued Jeannie, recovering her good-humour as she built up her edifice to her satisfaction.

‘You are wrong, Jeannie, altogether wrong,’ was all Iris could say.

‘Maybe sae,’ answered Jeannie cautiously, not liking contradiction, but certainly doubtful where this ill-fitting, loose stone could come into the building. ‘There was them that telled me when he came down in the mornin’ and fund the feck of his friends gane, and saw the letter for you—the ane wi’ the proper address—he grew as red as fire, and there was a glint in his een like a man who has gotten his heart’s desire—be it a croon, or a lass, or a lad bairn. Neist he grew as white as death, and there were draps o’ swate on his brow, as he gripped the table after the fashion o’ a man who is riven in twa in his contention wi’ his deadliest enemy. Syne he strachtened hissel’ and gae a sech, and said he was ganging immediately. He wrat a letter or twa, and sent aff a messenger express wi’ ane and laid the ither down, and cried for the time-table, paid the lawin’ and walked oot without looking ower his shouther for his breakfast. But when he was as far as the yett what did he do afore he gaed?’ asked Jeannie, resuming her tone of superior knowledge and settled conviction. ‘He cam’

back and pat up siller—you'll no hinder the maister frae kennin' what he was taking care o'—and left it, like a canny young gudeman, for the use o' his young gudewife, though he did not ca' her sae, in case he should be detained longer than they foresaw, till he cam' back to fetch her. What mak' you o' that, mem? Is that part o' a fule play? My leddy, it is neither fair nor wise to seek to darken the truth, the deil—that I should name him—only kens wherefore, even to a stranger lass, your inferior in warldly station, who yet would never harm you, but would stand up for you if she got the chance, and you needed her countenance.'

'Woman!' said Iris, in the vehemence of her remonstrance and the extremity of the moment, 'I would not depart from the truth to save my life, any more than you would; and if you are a happy girl in being able to boast of the virtue of your kindred, it should not make you hard to others less fortunate. If you, a girl like myself, will not believe me, where can I hope to find trust?'

Overcome by the successive shocks of the morning, Iris could only restrain by a great

effort the sob that rose to her throat and the tears to her eyes.

Jeannie's sharp eyes took in the signs, and the really kind heart of the girl, under her sturdy independence and shrewd observation, was touched.

'Na, dinna greet, my leddy, or mem, as you please ; I'll believe onything reasonable you like to tell me. And gif there has been ony fause or base trick played upon you, I'll do my best to see you richted, though I'm but a servant lass ; and sae will the maister and the mistress, which is mair to the purpose. I'm free to own they werena averse to me speerin' the ins and outs o' the story, if you gied me the chance. But if a living soul is to do you ony gude, mem, you maun speak oot, and keep naething back that has to do wi' the case.'

Iris could recognise the common-sense of the recommendation, and in the circumstances she felt she had better meet Jeannie's advances. After all, however much Iris's shrinking delicacy and the prejudices of her education recoiled from bestowing the confidence, there might well be worse confidants and counsellors than peasant-bred Jeannie,

with her perfect candour, honest maidenliness, warm heart, and ready wit.

‘It was as I said, Jeannie. Miss Dugdale, my cousin, proposed to act one of your runaway marriages, and went to dress as a runaway bride. But I did not like the play, and I liked it least of all for her, because she and one of the gentlemen—the taller and fairer of the two—are sweethearts, though she had never let him know that she cared for him ; indeed, she had been teasing and vexing him all the morning.’

Jeannie was intensely interested and appreciative. ‘Biting and scarting are Scotch folk’s wooin’,’ she said. ‘The young leddy maun hae a drap o’ gude Scotch blude in her veins. There’s mony a Maggie has “cuist her head and looked fu’ heich” to begin wi’. But you mauna stand and wear yoursel’ oot, when you may hae eneuch afore you.’ And Jeannie nimbly emptied out her basket, turned it over, and made Iris sit down upon it. It did not signify that Jeannie was in danger of losing the best of the morning for bleaching and ‘withering’ her ‘claes.’ In such a cause—the last grand marriage that was ever likely to be enacted in the inn,

about which there might be trouble in time to come—even the mistress must allow, justified the wasted sunshine.

‘It was not the man she liked in that way she had arranged should be the mock bridegroom.’ Iris struggled gallantly to tell the story.

‘Na, I could guess that,’ commented Jeannie from her own experience and maidenly instinct.

‘Mr. Acton—her real lover, I mean—was much hurt, and as he had to go off last night to see his family and join his ship—he is a sailor—there would have been no time for a reconciliation, and I fancied the thoughtless offence might have parted the two for ever.’

‘For certain,’ chimed in Jeannie decisively. ‘If the chield had ony spunk. Eh! but she maun hae been a wilfu’ madam—a heedless lassie.’

‘I said I would be the bride instead of Miss Dugdale.’

‘It was very gude o’ you, mem, very gude, but unco fulehardy,’ declared Jeannie, with her characteristic plain speaking. ‘Them that devised the mischief ocht to hae run the risk and borne the brunt.’

‘We had not the slightest idea, and I cannot see it yet, that there was the least danger, or that there could be a mistake when none of us, neither bride nor bridegroom, nor the gentleman who consented to say the words which you use in your marriage ceremony, meant anything by it.’

‘Then what for did they a’ slip awa’ like a’ knotless thread and leave you and the titled gentleman, who maun hae been the bridegroom—’deed I seed him in the character wi’ my ain een, and a braw bonnie bridegroom he looked—to suffer the scaith and the scorn?’ questioned Jeannie, with natural unmasked impatience.

‘It was the old lady, Lady Fermor, who is grandmother both to me and Miss Dugdale, that did it, and this is the painful part of the story,’ confessed Iris, with furious blushes. ‘She has a great friendship for—for Sir William Thwaite—you know his name already. She wished greatly that there should be a marriage between—between him and either of her grand-daughters—first one and then the other, but she had not been able to bring it about. I suppose, but I cannot tell, that she suddenly thought when

the temptation met her, for I cannot believe she brought us all this distance to lead us into a snare,' cried Iris, wringing her hands, 'she would make the jest look like earnest, deceive Sir William and frighten Miss Dugdale and me into imagining there was nothing left for us but to be married truly.'

'Oh, the auld bizzum ! forgive me, mem, since she is your granny ; but it is a sair pity when the auld, who suld be thinking o' a better place, hae neither conscience nor mercy, and are fit to sacrifice their bairns and their bairns' bairns if it will but compass some warldly plan of their ain. But what for did the other young leddy forsake you when you had done her sic a service ?'

'I cannot tell, Jeannie,' said Iris sadly. 'But I think Lady Fermor and her maid must have misled my cousin up to the last moment, and then forced her away. If so, she will never rest till she finds me out ; I can trust her for that.'

'You'll no think me impident, mem,' said Jeannie gravely, 'gin I say I canna a'the-gither comprehend, though I dinna misdoobt your word. But I maun hae a' the airts and pairts o' the story to gie to them that may

help you. There were letters left for you—one o' them directed to Leddy Thwaite. You opened baith, as gin you were free to do't—more by token, the gentleman sent you money for your use.'

It was unmistakable that Jeannie, though genuinely indignant on Iris's account because of what the young lady had told the girl, still clung with a certain faith to the marriage, partly because of the perplexing contradictions she had alluded to, partly from a natural reluctance to find that her first, and it might be her last, example of a real grand runaway marriage was likely to end in smoke.

Iris stood aghast at these fresh complications. Were the meshes of the net closing round her? But she would strive to the last to break through them.

'The letter addressed to Lady Thwaite was in my grandmother's handwriting. I knew the handwriting and looked no farther. I never doubted it was written to me.'

'It was a thoosand pities you tore open the envelope, for a written word gangs far in law. It makes nae odds what you did wi't though you hae burnt it to ase, for a dizzen

folk could swear to the direction, and you dauredna deny, you opened and read the letter.'

'But it was not Sir William who addressed it,' argued Iris, with a faint blush. 'I could understand the name would be of moment then. Think, Jeannie—anybody might write a letter to you calling you by a name which the writer had no right to give you, and you might open the letter by mistake; but the unwarrantable name would signify nothing, could not implicate you.'

'You forget, mem, the ither proofs,' said Jeannie, who had the logical head and the good parish schooling of many of her nation.

'I have a letter from Sir William Thwaite, mentioning the marriage as a frolic, and addressed to me as Miss Compton. Will that letter not contradict the other?'

'Weel, it suld do something,' granted cautious Jeannie. 'But what about the money for your use, mem?'

'He sent it to me as a loan lest Lady Fermor should have gone away and left me without caring to ascertain whether I had enough in my purse to pay my railway fare in following her, or in going back to my

other friends in England. The precaution was justifiable,' said Iris, flashing out in the middle of her patient humility and holding up her fine little head in the old style. 'We had many expenses when we were in town. I had lent Miss Dugdale part of my last quarter's allowance, and I had not got the money for the next quarter—I was nearly penniless.'

'The heartless, hard-fisted auld sorry!' cried Jeannie, unable to restrain herself or even to offer an apology for her freedom of speech. 'Even a servant lass like me, gin she be wise, has maistly a pund or twa in the savings bank, or a couple o' croons in her kist to fa' back upon. But you puir young leddies, who mustna mint at working for your ain hands, are often as helpless as bairns, and mair hardly dealt wi' by evil paurents. Weel, mem, I hae you noo. I can follow your tale, though as sure's death it's gey daft-like; still it's within the boonds o' possibility, and it's no ay the daftest lass that gets into trouble. For my pairt I believe you ilka word, and sae micht jurymen and judge, if it were iver to get into a coort, though the auld leddy and her maid were to take

fause aiths—as you may swear the t' ain wouldna stick at, and though the direction o' the letter and the money and a' were brocht in. But losh ! mem, it was playin' wi' fire to play at a Border marriage, on the very spot, as gin the spirit o' the place possessed you. The mere word o't micht stick to you and bleck you to your deein' day. What modest lass, be she o' the laighest degree, would care to gang into a coort and be speered and back-speered by sniggering cunning blackguards o' lawyers, aboot sic a job ? Though she were assured she would win her case, altogether scaithless she could never again be. As I said, the bare word o' the scandal would stick to her.'

' But the story's far too absurd for a court—who would carry it there ? not even Lady Fermor,' pled Iris.

' You dinna ken,' said Jeannie, who preferred to look at all sides of a question, and rather inclined to take the dark side ; ' one can never tell how bools will row or what ferlies may come to pass. It micht be a score or fifty years hence, when maist who could hae telled the truth were gane, gin you had married and had bairns, and ony money were

to be left to them, or to yoursel', and there were ither claimants for the siller who heard a souch lingering here o' what happened last nicht, heth! it might cost your lads and lasses their birthricht and cast shame on their mither in her grave.'

'Oh, Jeannie, don't be a prophet of evil,' implored Iris; 'and surely there is no need to look so far forward.'

'Deed, that is just what there is need o', and a far outlook is a grand thing. Could you no mak' it up among yoursel's?' suggested Jeannie, feeling her own responsibility, and striving to give the most discreet advice to the young English lady who had been so simple in her uprightness, and was so gentle in her tribulation. 'The titled gentleman seems to be a manfu' mindfu' chap, and a kind lad, taking it into account that he was made a cat's-paw o' as weel as you, by the auld leddy; for I fancy he wasna seeking the price o' either o' you twa young leddies. I say naething o' his being a grand match, though when a' else is richt, siller, and a lairdship, and a Sir before his name, are God's gifts, and no to be lichtly despised by ony prudent young leddy. He's faur frae ill-

faured, and you're a rale bonnie, civil-spoken young leddy, gin you'll let me say sae. You would mak' a braw young couple—your granny wasna far wrang there. Noo you're baith in the scrape, could you no think ower't and gin there be nae ither lad or lass standin' between, which makes a fell odds, could you twa no draw thegither and mak' the best o' what has happened? Whiles a prudent marriage is no the warst, and they say—

‘ “Happy's the 'ooin'
That's no long o' doin'.” ’

‘Jeannie!’ cried Iris, starting up as if the girl had been suborned by Lady Fermor to betray her grand-daughter's confidence which she had forced herself to give; ‘how can you say such a thing, after I had proposed to be my cousin's substitute, as if I were offering myself to Sir William and throwing myself at the head of the man I rejected with scorn years ago?’ persisted Iris, betrayed into casting down the last barrier of reserve she had jealously guarded.

‘Keep me!’ retorted Jeannie, ‘here's another cat louped out o' the poke; no that it mak's ony great differ that I can see,

except to prove the heart's gudeness o' the fine lad. Canny, mem! you're under nae obligation to mind what I say, and troth I dinna ken that I would do what I bade you mysel'. But I maun mak' you aware of something mair bearing on this wark. I spoke to you about my auld granny, who has a' her wits aboot her, and minds fine yet o' the grand runawa' marriages lang syne. She bides wi' a single woman, a niece, a' her ain bairns being dead lang syne, in a hoosie by the road-side—the road that leads to the station. Granny's an ill sleeper, and in summer she often gets up by screich o' day, and puts on her duds—she's fit for that yet—and creeps to the door for a breath o' the caller mornin' air. She was at the door this morning when the chaise with your leddy granny passed, driving to the station, and my granny has sent for me sin' syne. She thinks she kenned the auld leddy. Granny had time to look at her, for the horse next the hoosie had gotten a stane in ane o' its fore-feet, and the driver drew up and lichted down to pick it oot, jist forenent granny. And the auld leddy stood up and lent oot and banned him. Granny will hae it she kenned baith the face—

though it was a hantle aulder—and the vice, as weel as the rampaging way. Granny says it was a leddy wha run away frae her man, and came wi' a lord as ill as hersel' to be buckled thegither on the Borders. But the man wha married the couples then resisted. He said it was clean against the law o' Scotland. Had the twa been bachelor and maid, or widower and widow, he could have jined them sae as nae man could lowse them; but he couldna an' he wouldna, and it would be as muckle as his place was worth, for him to marry siccan a couple. For the auld marriage law o' Scotland was to aid the helpless and defend the waik, but never to paunder to sin.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A FLAG OF TRUCE.

IRIS hung her head, and gave a piteous sigh at the lamentable coincidence; but before she could say a word she heard a voice she ought to know, and looking round she saw Marianne Dugdale hurrying down the 'loaning' to the bleaching-green. In a moment the swollen burn, the spread-out clothes, and the peasant figure of Jeannie, with her sleeves rolled up to her shoulders, and her linen apron, seemed to whirl round with Iris and vanish out of her sight; and the folly of last evening, and the abandonment and fright of this morning, to dwindle into the faintest confused dream.

'I have come back for you, Iris, as soon as I could,' Marianne kept saying; 'we must start immediately and join granny.'

‘But I thought she had gone by the first train,’ said Iris, in bewilderment.

‘No ; she missed it, by the greatest good luck. Oh ! I’ve been so vexed ; but we can’t stay to talk about it now. We’ll have plenty of time afterwards. It was a horrid shame ; but she has heard from Sir William, and she has been forced to give in, stubborn as she is. Come along, like a duck. I’ve ordered out your trunk, which was left behind, too. I tell you Lady Fermor is half dead already, lying on a sofa in the waiting-room. We can’t keep her there all day, and propose to travel by night. It would be the death of a woman at her age, and I’m sure we don’t wish to have her death at our doors, whatever she may have done to us. The stableman is giving us fresh horses, and if we don’t lose a moment we shall still be in time for the mid-day train.’

‘The mid-day train !’ cried Iris excitedly ; ‘but Sir William Thwaite is going by the mid-day train !’

‘What although he is ?’ protested Marianne impatiently. ‘He won’t take a bite of us. We’ve travelled long enough with him to know he’s perfectly inoffensive. Besides,

he's not at our station. I told you he wrote to granny ; and though she did not show me the note, I believe he must have driven to the next station. Oh ! don't be a goose, Iris. Let us get away instantly.'

There was little power of resistance left in Iris, even if she had not seen, so far as she was able to see, that Marianne's presence was protection ; and that to rejoin Lady Fermor at once, however disagreeable it might be for both, would probably serve as the best refutation to any attempt to maintain an outrageous story. But Iris did not go without bidding good-bye to Jeannie, thanking her for her sympathy, and pressing on her a little gift by way of remembrance.

'You see my friends have come back for me, Jeannie. It was all as I said.'

'Aweel, miss, I hope it may end as you wuss,' said Jeannie doubtfully, as if she were taking one of her grand far outlooks, and seeing rocks and shoals ahead. 'I'm sure I trust so for your sake,' much more cordially, in answer to the wistful look in Iris's eyes. 'I think the maister wanted a word wi' you, but he's awfu' thrang wi' a pairty o' strangers seeking rooms for the fishing, and canna be

spoken to the noo, while the young leddy winna wait a blink. Since yer ain folk hae turned up again and are takin' you awa' wi' them, maybe it doesna matter. I'll keep your braw broochie and wear it, to mind me o' the young leddy who didna think hersel' aboon makin' a frien' o' me. Gude gang wi' you, mem ; an'—

“ May you live happy and dee happy,
And never drink out o' a dry cappie.” ’

Jeannie inadvertently wound up her farewell with one of the commonest couplets in use among her class for the benefit of a bride and bridegroom. It bore a startling resemblance to what it really was—a verse from a people's epithalamium.

Marianne would hardly wait for the leave-taking. She draggèd Iris away to the chaise, and Iris did not look back—she felt there was no need. The steep-roofed white house with the red roses and the honeysuckle about its windows, standing in the paddock among the old trees, which she had greeted at first sight with so light a heart, seemed as if it were branded on her memory. She might long to efface the scene and forget its very existence, but it would stand out clearly

before her so long as memory itself was left to her.

When the girls were in the chaise, the door shut, and the horses started ; neither the rapid motion nor any amount of jolts on the country road could keep Marianne's mouth shut or take away her breath.

‘ What a dreadful affair it has been ! How much better granny has acted the wicked grandmother than we performed the marriage ceremony ! Could you have believed it possible for so old a woman to be possessed by such an evil spirit ? I don't mean evil in a general way, to which one has got accustomed—I mean daring, defiant wrong-doing ! But I must tell you about my share in it. Of course, when I was awakened in the middle of the night, and told we were going to the station, to breakfast at the railway inn and start with the early train—after I had got over the impression that King Lud had come back, and the alarm that the house had gone on fire, and the fear that granny was taking leave of her senses—I was so cold, and sleepy, and stupid, that I might have been standing on my head all the time. Soames ran up every five minutes to beg me

to make haste ; and as I was getting so much attention I thought you were in good time and were with Lady Fermor. I never missed you till we were in the chaise, and even then I imagined that it was by a blunder you were being left behind, just as I concluded Sir William was on the box. I cried out to granny that you were not there, and I called you by name, but she had the strength to pull me down on the seat, and put her hand on my mouth. I was so taken by surprise that I could not free myself. Besides, all the time she was chuckling and laughing so as to put me off my guard, and persuade me the whole manœuvre was some good joke, of which I should presently see the point, and then I might laugh with my neighbours. But when the explanation came it was a string of cock-and-bull nonsense, of which I did not believe one word. She said Sir William Thwaite and you had been lovers years ago. What a story, Iris ! when you were never more than friends—the most matter-of-fact, good friends. She told me that you had not behaved well to him—another story !—but had trifled with him, and pretended to put him off. Then he went

away in a pet and made a low marriage. But all that was over, and now you wanted to make it up with him ; and you would have done so a great deal sooner if I had not stood in the way—she had the coolness to say so. She assured me that your coming in as the bride last evening was not to serve me, or anybody save yourself, though I had been so silly as to be taken in. You intended the step as a piece of encouragement to Sir William to come on again. I might be sure he understood it perfectly and accepted it, so now you both understood each other ; and it would be the kindest service your friends could render you—it would be doing by one's neighbour as one would be done by one's self, to go away and leave you to each other. You were really married in the Scotch fashion, and if you cared to be married over again in church with flying colours, you could be so any day, though it was not at all necessary. Everybody knew that Border marriages were perfectly good in the eyes of the law. Now, Iris, did you ever here such a rigmarole ? Would you not have thought that granny, however full of malice, had too much brains to concoct such sensational trash ?

Iris sat dumb for a moment, then she asked desperately :

‘ And what did you say, and do ?’

‘ Oh ! I did not say “ Gammon !” and “ Tell that to the marines !” as our boys would have said. I was so disgusted and enraged on my own account that I behaved beautifully ; yes, I did, Iris. I was perfectly quiet and polite. I said it was an entire mistake—I knew it to be so ; and that the moment I got to the station I would look out for a curricule and go back and fetch you. I would explain everything to the station-master, and if he refused to attend to me I would demand to be taken before a magistrate and tell my story. She and Soames might go on if they pleased ; you and I would follow after. We were old enough to take care of ourselves ; indeed, I was not sure that we should not manage it better than some of our elders could do it for us. Anyway, I would be torn to pieces by wild horses before I entered the train without you. She gave an ugly grin, and asked if I wanted Sir William for myself. But I was her match for once. I said she was at liberty to think so if she chose. She neither called me a

chit nor a baggage, nor proposed to put me out and leave me in the middle of the road, which would have been awkward, as you can see for yourself, my dear. There are such ruts and pools of water, that even if I had taken no wrong turning—and Sir William always says I am without the bump of locality—I should have wasted ever so much time trudging back for you. I had made up my mind she meant to give me up as a raging lunatic before I could open my mouth to the stationmaster; but the train steamed out of the station just as we drove up. Then she was so stiff, and had such difficulty in getting out of the chaise, that I could not leave her to Soames, who looked frightened out of her wits. I had to help, and see poor, miserable old granny laid on a sofa, and order brandy and tea for her. She was nearly two hours in coming round. I think now it was a trick, but at the time I got as frightened as Soames, and dared not turn my back. What brought her to herself at last was a man on horseback, with a letter from Sir William Thwaite to her. Then, sure enough, she looked like herself in a second, sat up, and read the letter. I think she said something about a

weak fool, who did not know his own mind, and could not play his game, though the cards were put into his hands. At last she turned round and told me, "Girl, do as you will ; you are a deluded idiot for your pains. Do you think Sir William has been making up to *you* all these weeks ? He may have given you reason to think so, to serve his own purpose ; but he has been sighing and dying for that saint and fool of a cousin of yours since first he set eyes on her. There is no accounting for tastes. But if he is not man enough to grasp his prey when it is within his reach he is not worth my help. Take your own way, and much good may it do you. But remember, if you are not back before the next train, I shall start with Soames, and my dutiful grandchildren may find their way back to me as they can." As if we could not, Iris ! Never mind her, darling ; don't look so horribly cast down. Why should we care ? Don't we know granny by this time ? And though she is a great misfortune to everybody connected with her—nobody can deny that—still, don't you think it is worst of all for herself ? And you have me ; I have not failed you.'

‘I cannot help caring, Marianne,’ said Iris, with a wan wavering smile. ‘It was so cruel.’

‘But it is not as if there had been anything in it, as if Sir William had cared for you, or you for him, that you should take it so to heart, and not laugh at it now that it is over, as at any other passing annoyance. Iris, was there ever anything in it—any foundation for what she said? Have you been hiding the truth from me all this time?’ cried Marianne, dropping the rare caressing touches she had been indulging in, drawing back into her corner of the chaise, and staring at her cousin suspiciously and jealously.

‘There was nothing to conceal,’ said Iris faintly, ‘except that long ago, as it seems to me now, when Sir William first came to Whitehills, we were thrown a good deal together. Grandmamma encouraged it, and wished to make a match between us, until he fancied he cared for me, and asked me to marry him, and I refused him—that is all, Marianne.’

‘And enough too,’ said Marianne sarcastically; ‘and I suppose you also refused Ludovic Acton?’

‘Oh no!’ declared Iris, with a weary little laugh, ‘for the very good reason that I never had the opportunity. King Lud, to my knowledge, never cared for any girl save one.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Marianne discontentedly; ‘I feel as if I had lost my faith in mankind, and womankind to boot. Why, I might have fallen in love with Sir William!’ she exclaimed naïvely.

‘When he would doubtless have returned the compliment.’

‘No, not if he had begun by sighing and dying for you, as granny said. I am not an utter fool, Iris,’ protested Marianne hotly, ‘though I may be a simpleton in believing in those I thought my friends. You are not a girl likely to be forgotten by a man like Sir William Thwaite. I should never have dreamed of putting you out, any more than of your keeping all this back from me, when I believed I knew everything about you, even when I told you—what I told last evening.’

‘My dear little cousin, be reasonable,’ Iris exerted herself to entreat. ‘The story was an old one, dead and buried for years.

Was it for me to dig it up out of its grave, to go and boast that an unlucky man had once put himself into my power, and I had abused his confidence after many days? Would you have had me do that? You could see for yourself that there was nothing between Sir William Thwaite and me, that we were no more than friends.'

Marianne was silent for a long time, with her dark eyes cast down and a lowering brow. She suddenly looked up, and it darted into her head that Iris's little face had grown colourless in the course of twelve hours, that there were dark rings under her eyes, and that her hands trembled as they lay loosely in her lap. She had been insulted and persecuted almost more than she could bear, and here was the girl in whose favour Iris had interposed, for whose happiness she had been so concerned, even to exposing herself to misconception, in order to secure Marianne's welfare, proceeding to persecute the victim, in turn, out of sheer unworthy vanity and exacting pride.

'I am a heartless creature, worse than I could have thought possible,' Marianne cried. 'I beg your pardon, my pet, if you will let

me call you so—you who were so good to me ; and it must have cost you much more than I guessed.'

'Yes, it cost me something,' said Iris simply, 'because I did not like the play in itself, and it was inevitable that there should be some awkwardness. But neither of us knew what we were doing, or had any notion what it might lead to. Don't speak of it,' said Iris, with a shiver ; 'I cannot talk of it yet.'

'Just let me say one thing : if I had been in your place, and she had done it to me—I suppose she would all the same ; I think she wanted Sir William to have me if he could not have you—and if I had quarrelled with King Lud, and he had come to hear the garbled story—oh ! Iris, Iris, I should have been lost. My dear, my dear, I ought to go down on my knees to thank you, and I do thank you with all my heart.'

'I know it, and it is some comfort to have served you.'

'At your own expense ! Oh ! I must do something for you—not that I can ever repay you, but to prevent your being a scapegoat for me. If not, I shall break my heart for

having brought you into such trouble, and he will never forgive me after all, for he is as fond of you as if you were one of his sisters.'

'Don't speak of it,' Iris repeated imploringly.

'It drives me wild when I think I have been deceived,' confessed Marianne ingenuously, after another pause; 'not that you deceived me—at least, you could not help it. But I wonder if it was all a piece of imagination on my part—it is better to know the truth, though it will make me ashamed — that Sir William liked me a little?'

'I am sure he liked you very much,' said Iris promptly; 'you were so bright, you made him chaff you and laugh with you as I never saw him do with anyone else. You know he is rather silent and serious for a young man.'

'Yes,' said Marianne doubtfully; 'but I thought he sometimes looked at me sadly, as well as kindly, as if he would like to take care of me—you know what I mean—I dare say he pitied me. He knew granny of old, and he thought I was not in very good

hands, and he might be a better protector ; but that would have been a great mistake,' shaking her head, 'and I believe he was thinking of his old love, his true love, yesterday when I brought you to him. A great glow came into his face—I was looking more at King Lud, naturally, but I saw it; and don't you remember he said "I will," as if his heart was in his mouth? I felt it at the time with a sense of something odd, though it went out of my head the next moment. Could he have fancied for an instant that the scene was real? Then what a temptation to him granny's behaviour must have been! Dearest Iris, can the jest not become earnest, and you two friends be as happy as King Lud and I shall be some day?' cried Marianne, clasping her hands on her knees and leaning over to her cousin.

'For shame's sake, don't talk such nonsense, Marianne!' said Iris, with asperity at last. 'You know I offered myself to him, though it was in compliance with your foolish arrangement—not mine. You ought to be aware that there is no foundation for your suggestion;' and Marianne was silenced for once.

The girls arrived in time for the train, and Lady Fermor had so far recovered that she was on the platform. She looked them over, then spoke to Iris with an effrontery which was almost without parallel.

‘So you have taken us in, Iris,’ she said lightly and airily, with a double meaning in her words, and yet as if nothing had happened.

It gave her grand-daughter strength to assert herself.

‘You have not kept your promise to me, Lady Fermor,’ Iris said. ‘You might have told me that you wished to get rid of me, and I should have gone away honourably, as I did before. I shall go away again as soon as I can.’

‘Without asking my leave, no doubt?’ exclaimed her ladyship, raising her eyebrows.

‘I did ask your leave, and now I may take it for granted.’

‘As you will, Miss Compton. I am too old to parley with you.’

It was a silent party—down to Marianne Dugdale—that travelled across the grey Border moors, through the more fertile por-

tion of Dumfriesshire, up to the heathery hills of Annandale.

When the train drew up in the Moffat Station, long shadows were falling across the platform ; but Iris, who sat by the nearest door, distinguished a well-known figure in the shadow, and drew back aghast. Sir William Thwaite had come on from Dumfries, and was standing like a sentinel on duty—with only a heightened colour to indicate any trace of discomposure—prepared to hand the party out.

‘ You here, Thwaite ? ’ cried Lady Fermor, in loud challenge. ‘ Well, we’ve been playing at cross-purposes, it seems ; but it is lucky that we have shaken ourselves right, come together, and all turned up at our destination. Have you made any inquiry about the moor—whether the birds are shy or not ? ’

He had no reply for her, beyond helping her carefully out of the carriage and leading her away. By that time Iris understood what his change of plans meant. His presence there as well as hers was best for making everything be as it had been, and for putting out of mind the *mauvais quart d’heure* which had inter-

vened. If he had not come immediately, and the two had not met again without delay, she felt as if their re-encountering each other would have been intolerable. Now it was still so much a matter of course, and the true gloss was so impressed on an idle farce, that before he parted from them in the lobby of the hotel, Iris could go up to him in the presence of Lady Fermor, Marianne, and Soames, and gently return to him his little packet, saying :

‘Thank you very much, Sir William ; you see I have not needed your loan.’

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A SUITOR.

For the next few days the party returned to their former habits, Sir William not availing himself immediately of his right to constitute 'a gun' on a neighbouring moor.

The sole evidence that there had been any disturbance of the company's tranquillity remained in a certain constraint which clung about their intercourse, a disinclination to allude to their halt on the Borders, and an utter avoidance of a topic which had been much discussed before.

Yet the forbidden topic cropped up occasionally, even without Lady Fermor's instrumentality. When the ladies and their squire were strolling about the streets of the little town, and had come back to the street in which their comfortable old inn was situated, some conjecture was hazarded about its age.

Marianne Dugdale predicted they would not find an old inn in Scotland of a later creation than Prince Charlie's time. A respectable tradesman passing by, and catching the tenor of the conversation, took it upon him to supply the date and oblige the party with a gratuitous piece of information.

'Auld Lord Dundonald, the great sailor, came on here with his bride after their runawa' marriage. Ye may mind the marriage was disputed in a court of law after Tam Cochrane had bidden a long fareweel, baith to his honours and his disgrace, and my leddy was a bitter-tongued, weedow woman, driven, puir sowl, to fecht baith for and against her ain sons.'

'The folly is in the air,' said Lady Fermor sarcastically; 'shall we consult your safety, Thwaite, and flee back to England?'

'I do not know myself in any danger, my lady,' said the person addressed, stiffly and sternly, while Marianne talked fast to Iris of climbing the hill behind the town, which was somehow connected with hanging and the gallows.

It was not the anticipation of the exercise which deepened to a painful scarlet the rose

in the delicately tinted face, and then drained the colour away before a sudden pallor. It was the sense of unmerited humiliation and affront, and a terrified recollection of Jeannie the maid at the Border inn's warning with regard to the slow, steady, poisonous scandal that might distil, drop by drop, through generations, and break out with fatal virulence in the far future.

Still, whether to drown care and escape unpleasant recollections, the younger members of the party were as indefatigable as ever in their business of sight-seeing. They walked, rode, and drove to the pretty mineral well in its nook among the hills, to 'lone St. Mary's Loch,' with its silver strand, where the images of Scott and Hogg and Wordsworth for the moment effaced all private phantoms, to the spot where Tweed, Clyde, and Annan are near akin in their origin, to the weird lichen-covered oaks of Lochwood, like trees of another world, to the colossal green hollow known as 'the Devil's Beef-tub,' to 'fair Kirkconnel Lea,' the scene of the most wildly tragic and deeply pathetic of Scotch ballads, which greatly took the young people's fancy. To them the Helen who in-

terposed between her lover and his murderous rival and received the shot destined for another in her own tender bosom, was the truest of heroines, so that English strangers of another generation could echo from the heart that unspeakably fond and piteous lament :

‘ Oh ! would I were where Helen lies,
For night and day on me she cries ;
Oh ! would I were where Helen lies,
On fair Kirkconnel Lea.’

On the little company’s return from one of their excursions they were amazed to find the big body, big face, and sandy moustache of King Lud in the man who was standing smoking and looking out for them at the inn door.

He had done more than keep his word. He had spoken of seeing them again before he sailed ; but that was comparatively a vague prospect ; he had said nothing of returning so soon to make up their party and finish their excursion. He looked solemn in answer to the gay banter which Marianne Dugdale, after an instant of silent delight, was able to rain upon him.

‘ Were all your friends from home, Mr.

Acton ? Has your ship sailed without you ? Did you think we should be robbed and murdered without the protection of your doughty arm in the old land of Border reivers ? I could do better than that if I tried—like the duchess in *Wonderland*, I could make myself picturesquely charming, and come-over the Scotch loons with my soft English tongue.’

Iris, whose nerves had been thoroughly shaken, was divided between two sources of apprehension. Had Ludovic Acton taken it into his head to institute inquiries, read up information, and somehow discovered for himself the dangerous nature of their late entertainment, and had he come all the way from the Rectory, during the small amount of leave that was likely to remain to him, to put her on her guard, to volunteer his evidence, and to save everybody from sorrow and injury ?

Sometimes Iris was driven to believe that if the step could be taken without further publicity, the greatest safety for all might lie in a deposition made before a magistrate, which even Lady Fermor ought to sign. The next moment Iris was tempted to think that she was making a mountain out of a

mole-hill, and grossly exaggerating a trifle which would never be called in question. If Ludovic did not mean to act as a mediator, was his mother worse? and, if so, why had he quitted her?

The first time the old friends were alone for a few minutes, King Lud cleared up the mystery, his manner presenting a nice blending of sheepishness and burning anxiety. He had got his promotion; he was now a captain in her Majesty's navy, with his appointment to a ship a matter of days. But before these days were ended he must avail himself of his promotion to bring to a close the suspense which, he maintained, was worse than sharks, icebergs, and torpedoes all taken together.

Of course he could not run away with Marianne Dugdale, though they were in Scotland. He was so bent on his narrative that he did not notice how Iris winced at the dry joke. Neither could the most sanguine man in his profession have hoped to marry her before sailing. Even a middy who was not particular might have found a difficulty in getting up his kit so instantaneously as that otherwise delectable step implied.

Miss Dugdale could not do without her

trousseau. Besides, he loved her too well to hurry and harass her ; if ever woman deserved to be patiently and loyally waited for she deserved it. But if Miss Dugdale, and her friends for her, would condescend to have anything to say to him, would consent to an engagement, he did not think, unless she was less freshly simple and modest in her tastes, less nobly and gloriously unworldly, than he believed her to be, that the engagement need be very long.

He could show flattering letters from some of the swells of the Admiralty and good-natured commendations from his old commanders, which he had never so much as given to the family at home to read and exult over, because, naturally, his people would think a great deal too much of such bosh, and he hated bounce and palaver. It would be the first time that he had counted on them as any good, if they would satisfy Marianne Dugdale and her friends of what he thought he could venture to engage, that a fair, steady rise in his profession lay before him.

He had not let the grass grow beneath his feet. Modest, retiring King Lud, under the influence of the great passion of his young

manhood, had already rushed down to Devonshire, introduced himself to Mr. Dugdale, and interviewed him. The spick-and-span captain had explained his not too elevated but hopeful position, and requested the father's permission to address his eldest daughter.

The poor gentleman was neither propitious nor unpropitious. He was engrossed with his own affairs, to which the marriage of one of his daughters belonged certainly, but only in a subsidiary degree. Engulfed in the bottomless swamp of agricultural difficulties, Mr. Dugdale saw no light upon his future beyond a will-of-the-wispish expectation from his brother in India, who, though he was a mighty personage in his sphere, had so many sons of his own, that he might well decline to adopt another family. Young Acton might end by becoming a rear-admiral, when Marianne would have done very well for herself. Even if he stopped short with being a commodore he was not to be despised. Nay, a naval captain's pittance did not mean such starvation to a small family as a country gentleman's reduced rents from an estate groaning under a burden of mortgages, threa-

tened ruin to the head of the house with his helpless wife and daughters. The officer and his wife would begin housekeeping with only a couple of mouths to fill, while Mr. Dugdale had nearly half-a-dozen to satisfy.

On the other hand, what had the dowager Lady Fermor to say on the matter? By making a marriage displeasing to the late Lord Fermor's testatrix she might be lost—not only to Marianne, but to the whole family of Dugdale.

Mr. Dugdale had a natural affection for his daughter; but he could not afford the sacrifice. In the end the eager suitor was referred to his father's prodigal parishioner.

This sentence filled King Lud with chagrin—well-nigh hopelessness.

‘I know she has other views for her granddaughter,’ he groaned in Iris’s ear; ‘and she is right so far, that Marianne Dugdale deserves the best match in the kingdom—or a throne, if it would make her happier. Do you think there is the slightest chance for me in applying to the old lady?’

Iris could not in sincerity say she had an exalted opinion of his chance in that quarter; but she managed to remark with some am-

biguity she did not think Lady Fermor had any definite designs at present for the disposal of Marianne.

‘There is Thwaite,’ alleged King Lud gloomily, ‘almost a member of the family. He has been its cavalier ever since Lady Fermor and Miss Dugdale came up to town.’

Had King Lud forgotten that Sir William had been the favourite cavalier at Lambford long before Marianne Dugdale showed her face there? Was the young fellow blinded by his own feelings? Had his mind contracted; had he, in fact, no mind to spare for any interest before and after Marianne Dugdale’s appearance on the scene? It was clear that he had heard nothing of the sequel to the Border play in which he had taken part—nor was he likely to hear, Iris was thankful to think, unless his relations to the family became very intimate.

‘There would be disgusting advantages in that match,’ King Lud bemoaned himself.

‘But Marianne is not mercenary,’ Iris reminded him.

‘Of course not; her dear vagaries, her

sweet waywardness and irresistible originality are all utterly destitute of mercenariness.'

Iris laughed and nodded; it was comical to her to hear King Lud, who had been wont to take things easy, by his own confession violently in love.

'But Thwaite himself is a good fellow, for all that has come and gone. I always liked him. If he made a great mistake, went wrong and smarted for it, he has come honourably through a lengthened probation since then. She is just the generous girl to long to make up to him for what he has suffered, to glory in overlooking his small deficiencies, and be willing to risk herself to keep him straight. No,' said Ludovic Acton in dolefully magnanimous self-depreciation, 'I cannot pretend to Thwaite's advantages in any respect. Why, even in the matter of looks, he has it all on his side. He is a comely, well-drilled lout, while I'm a whey-faced, moon-faced—you can't deny, Iris, she has compared my face to the moon!—clumsy sea-lubber.'

Iris laughed till the tears came into her eyes; she wanted so much to comfort and

encourage him without breaking faith, and without buoying him up with false hopes where Lady Fermor was concerned.

‘I think I may say if grandmamma has not entirely given up contemplating Whitehills as a possible establishment for Marianne, she has not been looking at it in that light very lately.’

‘Oh, thank you, Iris ; you are a good soul. I don’t wonder that Marianne adores you,’ said Ludovic as gratefully as if Iris had gone far to secure to him the passionately coveted boon. ‘Only Marianne might spare a little common civility to a fellow who adores her.’

“ Although she is forced to dissemble her love,
Why need she kick him downstairs ?”

‘Have patience,’ Iris told him. ‘Do they know at the Rectory ? What does Lucy think ? What does the Rector say ? Is the mother pleased ?’

She feared that even in King Lud’s case the new love might have so eclipsed the old as to cause him to fail those who had so long held the first claims on him. It was balm to her gentle, faithful heart to hear

him say, with such ready confidence that it was clear he had not guessed her suspicion :

‘ Oh, my people are as good as gold, as usual. They say, if my happiness is concerned, that is everything. They are only longing to make her acquaintance. What a fool I am to speak of her as if she were certainly mine ! They hardly saw anything of her before she went to town with Lady Fermor. I can depend upon them doing everything they can to befriend her when I am away.’

‘ Happy man ! at least you have acted on the most manly, straightforward principles, and whatever comes of it, you will have the comfort of that reflection,’ said Iris warmly.

But the newly-made captain did not see what else he could have done, therefore it looked as if, in the result of failure, he would miss even the small consolation of an approving conscience. It was left for his old friend Iris to take the assurance that King Lud’s behaviour had been worthy of himself, and that in one way or another his reward would not fail him.

The reward was more and more according to his heart than Iris or anyone else would have dared to hope. Strange to say, Lady Fermor did not oppose the engagement, beyond saying that she thought it as foolish as such contracts usually were. But if the young pair chose to enter into this one, she would not interfere. She craved leave to inform Captain Acton, in case of awkward mistakes, that her grand-daughter, Marianne Dugdale, would have no more money from her than a couple of hundred pounds to buy her trousseau, if she ever needed one, and perhaps another couple of hundreds to buy her mourning on the death of the speaker. She had never intended to give Marianne more, unless on a contingency of which there had ceased to be any possibility. She would write to Mr. Dugdale to this effect.

Such a communication, however disappointing to the unfortunate landowner, was a virtual withdrawal of all opposition to the engagement. The truth was, that Lady Fermor did not believe in engagements, short or long, and never had cared a straw for Marianne Dugdale, except as a living toy

to amuse the old lady, and an instrument of vengeance upon Iris Compton.

King Lud was free to address his mistress, yet even the freedom might have had a disastrous issue but for recent events, and the knowledge that the suitor would sail and very likely be in another hemisphere within the month. If there were any elements of character in common between Lady Fermor and Marianne Dugdale, the old and the young woman were totally unlike in this, that what the former counted on—correctly as far as her own instincts went—as certain sources of the dissolution of the engagement, formed the best conditions not merely for its present attainment, but for its permanent safety, where Marianne Dugdale had to do with it.

A lover far away, in peril of water and of deadly foreign climates even in times of peace, in the monotony and deprivations of an officer's duties on board ship, on a long cruise with only her word to rely on, her love and constancy to defend his cause, was likely to prove a far more formidable, irresistible wooer to Marianne Dugdale, a far surer pretender to her hand after years of separation,

than he would have been had he figured as a man endowed with many of the good things of fortune, dangling at her elbow, pleading his claims every day.

Marianne was taken unawares. She laughed and pouted, and even cried a little, as if she were a very ill-used little person; then suddenly threw down her arms and surrendered at discretion, making no terms, beyond the right of teasing King Lud, which the infatuated fellow was only too content, according to ancient example, to let her do. Even this remnant of power was in danger of being wrested from her grasp, every time his approaching departure crossed her mind and clouded over the whole universe to her. When Marianne began to hate post-time, and to shiver at the reading out of naval intelligence, her season of maidenly haughtiness and defiance was well-nigh over. The 'Lady of the Lea' was practically vanquished.

It was something to see a good fellow and an innocent child so radiantly happy as those two, though his lapsing leave was to subdue their happiness long before the summer had ended; to know mortals so blest, though

the curse which heralded the ejection from Eden was dogging their steps. The man and woman would soon quit the garden, but their love would help them in the struggle with the thorns and thistles of earth, and make it easier for them to find the strait gate and narrow way which lead to a nobler and more enduring Paradise. Lady Fermor called the pair a couple of lunatics ; but Iris caught herself and Sir William regarding the two with the mild, patient benignity of true guardians and sponsors.

There was no evidence of resentment on Sir William's part on account of his faintly and fitfully foreshadowed office of 'guide, philosopher, and friend' to Marianne Dugdale being filched from him. If a kind of wistful look came into his blue eyes at times, it did not interfere with the perfect cordiality of his congratulations to King Lud and the young lady, and she received such demonstrations better from him than from anyone else, Iris not excepted.

It seemed as if nothing were to be wanting to the happiness of the lovers. King Lud had been proudly and affectionately desirous that, if it could be managed, Marianne should

go on a visit to the Rectory before he got his sailing orders. Included in the desire was the natural longing to take leave of her in his father's house, and to consign her under the ordeal to the tender keeping of those who would be sharing her sorrow with her.

Even this wish was granted. Lady Fermor became complacent to an almost alarming extent ; Marianne might go since she had got her father's permission. The old lady even volunteered to render the project more feasible by sending Soames to chaperon the lovers, and bring back some articles of dress which Soames's mistress wished her maid to get from Lady Fermor's wardrobe at Lambford.

So this idyl disappeared from the contemplation of the edified spectators at Moffat, and anything more they were to learn of it, in the meantime, must be from letters—Marianne's hurried but highly appreciative announcement of her safe arrival and good reception ; Lucy Acton's kind, if more composed and modified reports. Yes, Marianne was a dear girl, and it was delightful to see King Lud so exultant ; who could resist it ?

Her father and mother, not to say Lucy herself, might have preferred another choice on Ludovic's part; but without question the principals in the compact were entitled to follow their inclinations so long as these were perfectly lawful. Marriages were made in heaven, and she thought—nay, she was sure, Ludovic's would prove a happy marriage in all essentials.

Marianne was original and a little wilful. She had found a broken mouse-trap, which had exercised her spirit a good deal. She had sent the children to fetch all the mouse-traps in the house to be inspected by her, and had set about mending them on the spot, so that Gerald was her chum from that moment. She had insisted, and carried her point, that she could repair the hinge of the gate without the aid of the smith. She had taken the Rector quite by surprise when he found her engaged on the job.

He had always been so fond of womanly softness and domesticity—apart from parish work—and so horrified by women's clamouring for equality with men, just because he would, of his own free will, defer to every woman worthy of the name, and pay her

homage, which was surely a great deal better than treating her as his equal. However, Marianne had assured him that though she liked to be her own smith and carpenter, she did not think she had a vocation for stump oratory. She would never propose to do anything save sit in the Rectory pew and let him fill his own pulpit.

After that explanation, Marianne had got round the Rector by looking out his sermons for him, and practising the hymns he liked best in order to help the choir in church. She had objected to advanced arithmetic being so little taught in the school, and had proposed to introduce mathematics; and though Lucy was convinced Marianne was wrong in the last proposal, she daresayed the reformer might be right in the first. Lucy had come to think so since Marianne had been of the greatest use to Mrs. Acton in making up her subscription books—Marianne had done it so cleverly, and rendered every sum so beautifully clear and without a mistake in five minutes.

She had won all the hearts of her children—of the boys especially—at the school-feast. As for the curates, she saved her, Lucy, an

immense amount of trouble ; for Marianne could twist them round her finger, and did so without once provoking King Lud to jealousy.

Yes, they all liked dear Ludovic's future wife very much, and Lucy was convinced that, though there might be a little hitch here and there—as where was there not in human relations ?—still the family circle into which the stranger had entered, instead of being divided into hostile factions with the members set against each other by her means, would continue as united and attached as ever.

It was plain the Actons were behaving well, as might have been expected from them. They were making the best of their son and brother's engagement to Marianne Dugdale, and so taking the wisest course to preserve his and their dignity and happiness.

Iris could not help smiling a little at the Rector's little discomfiture. She thought of what his similes must have been—of the lily which his sailor boy had been permitted to gather and wear in his breast ; of the dove which was not frightened to nestle in his

blue jacket, and would fly in spirit with him over many a league of sea, to abide with him in calm and tempest, till he should return to redeem his pledge. Then Iris pictured how the worthy man must have been taken aback when he came upon Marianne in her blouse and the nearest approach to a leather apron she could improvise, hammering away like another Jael, with her chubby hands soiled—as Jael's need not have been—and perhaps a smut on Marianne's face; or when he must entertain a rueful suspicion that the east wind had got into his future daughter-in-law's temper, and that both she and her neighbours must suffer a fair share of discomfort till the *mal d'humeur* was by some means routed.

But Iris could also rejoice that her old friends were vindicating what she had long known of their virtues. She could be ungrudgingly glad that Marianne was to have everything in her favour, every chance of developing into a good woman: an early engagement to a fine fellow in the best sense of the words, the hearty support of all his friends as well as of her own, an absence which in its nature could only make the warm

heart grow fonder, and in all probability a happy marriage the next time King Lud came home.

How strange it is, when all is said, that without reference to merit, so much of earthly sunshine, peace, and smooth sailing is granted to some, while to others is given an equal amount of the shadow of death, trouble, and a stormy passage through life ! Yet could Iris take upon her to say, that the first who received all the smiles and none of the frowns of fortune—so called—were really the favoured and honoured voyagers, instead of those who grew strong by many a tussle with winds and waves, and came in at last, battered, but with their colours flying, to the haven where they would be ?

CHAPTER XL.

FALSE SEEMING.

DATING as nearly as possible contemporaneously with the departure of Ludovic Acton and his promised wife under the staid wing of Soames, there began for Iris one of the strangest experiences of her tried life. She was alone with Lady Fermor and Sir William Thwaite. Lady Fermor continued in the blindest mood. Whether she were seeking to atone for her late outrage, whether she were 'fey,' according to the old Norse superstition, and her last days had come, there could be no question of her indulgence to her grand-daughter and her kindness to Sir William, even when they crossed her will and thwarted her plans.

But along with the old lady's bluff good-humour there commenced to peep out an inference drawn by Lady Fermor which was

almost intangible in its expression at first. But the suggestion grew always more overpowering and all-pervading, while it could not be boldly repelled, because it was never distinctly stated. It was a subtle, entangling, bewildering implication, leading to a spirit of perturbation and confusion on the part of those who could not deny what was not charged against them. They feared so much as to admit the hint, lest the faintest whisper of its existence should lend tangibility to the light material and afford a basis for a whole towering edifice of doubt and suspicion.

Lady Fermor had boasted that no one should be able to say she had not taken care of her grand-daughter's morals and manners. Having been an unscrupulous evil-doer in her own day, she was all the more alive to avoiding the very appearance of evil in her descendant. Her grandmother had therefore insisted on strict decorum for Iris Compton from her childhood. Suddenly the old lady relaxed her rule. She treated the two young people, who were still with her, as if they were a couple of children, or the nearest relations. She would have sent them out, in

the intervals of Sir William's sport, on the longest *tête-à-tête* rambles and riding excursions without so much as a groom to bear them company. When, because of the unaccustomed nature of the liberty extended to them, they were instinctively shy of it and of each other, she chid them gaily for not availing themselves of their privileges, as if they abstained from them entirely on her account.

‘You two’—she had got to coupling them together continually—‘are a great deal too considerate. It ain't in me to be a kill-joy, but you make me ashamed, though I must confess that it is a failing I am not given to indulging in. Why should you not have your good time as well as others? Don't let me interfere with you.’

Lady Fermor had naturally her special seat in her own window of the drawing-room, and she took to barricading herself in it with screens, cushions, foot-stools, and little tables for her various refreshments—biscuits, fruits, wine, tea, as her habits and the hour required. She had always been sufficient for herself, but she appeared to be becoming impatient, even of the company of a young man of her

own choosing, and to be contracting a passion for solitude.

‘You can keep to your own window. You must have a great deal to talk about—young couples always have. Old people have done with everything save thinking, and that, too, goes, I suppose, so that there is only sensation left, poor creatures that we are! But say your say while you have it to do, and want to be out with it; never mind me, I shan’t hear a syllable at this distance.’

While the party had been travelling, Lady Fermor had resigned the head of the table to one of her grand-daughters, but she had left the foot vacant. Now she elected that Sir William should play the host opposite Iris as the hostess. And Lady Fermor told them to their faces, in the most innocent manner possible, so that they felt themselves behaving foolishly to blush, that they became their relative positions and discharged their respective duties admirably.

Iris did her best to supply Soames’s place in the maid’s temporary absence, and was often alone with her grandmother in her bedroom. On these occasions Lady Fermor was even ostentatious in professing her entire

satisfaction with Iris's efforts to serve her, which grew bungling, from sheer astonishment and trepidation at the gracious forbearance with which the girl's worst blunders were borne, and the praise indiscriminately awarded to the whole performance.

'I am very much obliged to you, child, you are too attentive; but I ought not to keep you from other duties.'

'Grandmamma, you are laughing at me,' cried Iris in desperation. 'What duties have I in comparison with the obligation to wait upon you, if you will let me? I know I do it very badly, but I hope to improve, and become a proficient abigail by the time Soames comes back.'

'You undervalue yourself far too much. It is a bad practice, which you must not let grow upon you, else people will be sure to take advantage of it. There are plenty of forward, encroaching persons to be met with everywhere; more than that, excessive humility, which is often affectation, does not suit your station in life. You ought to remember your catechism about "the station to which you are called," and think of what you owe to others besides indulging your own inclina-

tions. 'There now,' said Lady Fermor, after Iris had enveloped her grandmother in her dressing-gown and removed her wig, replacing it by one of the exploded nightcaps, which are only in vogue to shelter the bald pates of octogenarians, 'go down and entertain William.'

Lately Lady Fermor had taken to dropping the 'Thwaite' and the 'Sir' before the Christian name, in speaking apart with Iris of the Squire of Whitehills. The new habit smote upon Iris's ears with a peculiarly familiar home-like effect; when the name was coupled with a dogmatic recommendation to 'entertain' its bearer, Iris's breath was taken away. She was not even fit to meet the cool command with the calm assurance that Sir William could entertain himself; if not, he must be the sufferer; she was not bound to step in to his rescue. She did not say it, but she failed to return to the drawing-room; she retired to her own room, and put her hands before her face.

At the same time neither Iris nor Sir William could resent mere insinuations, which after all might owe the most of their significance to what might have become

their morbid self-consciousness, and troubled fancies. She knew as well as if she had heard it what would have been her grandmother's answer if she, Iris, had protested against the inference cunningly drawn. Lady Fermor would have cried in the height of incredulous astonishment, 'Child, what did I say? What could you think was my meaning?' and an explanation of what Iris might have thought, as it appeared unjustifiably reviving all the horrible mischief that had been set at rest, was too dreadful for a delicate-minded girl to face without the utmost necessity for the encounter.

Iris seriously revolved the alarming doubt if her grandmother's mind were giving way at last, when one day, on two occasions, both when the ladies were sitting by themselves, and when Sir William was with them, Lady Fermor did what she had once done before on paper, addressed Iris as 'Lady Thwaite.' 'What is your opinion of the weather, Lady Thwaite?' 'Lady Thwaite, have you seen the birds in Sir William's bag?'

Iris did not answer. She reserved what meteorological opinion she had, and whether she had enjoyed the spectacle referred to,

she only looked down with startled dismay and shifting colour. She could not have raised her eyes to meet Sir William's for the world.

The incorrectly applied title might have proceeded from a lapse of memory in an old woman, though Lady Fermor hitherto had not been liable to such lapses. Anyhow she did not show that she had observed her mistake by calling herself back or apologising for it. Her sole comment on Iris's dead silence on both occasions was by repeating her inquiries with a little impatience, without again naming the person spoken to. 'Did you hear me? What is your opinion of the weather?' 'Have you seen Sir William's grouse?'

If the misapplication of the name were not a slip of the tongue, if taking them along with other indications they formed an index that Lady Fermor's once acute and powerful though neither fine nor cultivated intellect, and clear steady brains were, as she had predicted, losing their edge, becoming clouded over, even reeling on their throne, the shape the disorder of her faculties had taken would not be at all wonderful. It would be almost

natural that the first of a throng of coming delusions should point to her conviction of the accomplishment of a scheme on which she had so set her imperious will that one of her last rational acts—if it could be called rational—had been to seek to establish an unpardonable fraud by coercing the victims to submit to it, and ratify it, out of shame and terror for a woman's good name.

But what could Iris do in the case? She was left for a week alone, save for Sir William Thwaite, with her grandmother, far from home—viewing distance in the light of Lady Fermor's age and infirmities, in a little Scotch town, which was almost like a foreign watering-place to a girl so little travelled in these travelling days.

It was a new vague danger to be dreaded, along with the constant miserable embarrassment to be endured.

Iris could hardly say how much Sir William Thwaite was struck or what he felt. It was impossible to consult him on the point. Once he had betrayed every emotion of his soul in his face as in a mirror. Further experience of life had taught him to wear a mask to some extent; but in the course of

the last few days the mask had fallen occasionally, though only with the effect of electrifying and baffling the beholder more completely. For the shifting expression was, after all, more perplexing than any steadiness of impenetrability. Was Iris, as well as her grandmother, losing her senses, when the girl asked herself which was Sir William's true look, and which exhibited his real state of mind — the bluff impassiveness which he generally kept up, or the glimpses of passion checked in its display, yet with tokens of such profoundness as belonged to the depths of the man's nature?

The very material world around Iris ; the old-fashioned inn to which Thomas Cochrane and his young wife had come after their runaway marriage ; the braes over which the old moss-troopers had sped in many a moonlight foray, which had sometimes included a disconsolate bride snatched along with her living dowry of lowing kine and bleating sheep from the English side of the border ; the holiday watering-place among the hills, with the holiday company in which were various specimens of lovers, and no lack of newly-wedded pairs come to spend their simple

honeymoons—all began to assume an unreal, sympathetic, or mocking aspect to Iris. The strain was becoming too hard for her. She said to herself, with despairing deliberation, she could not bear it much longer. Her grandmother, if she had been in her right mind, had been very wicked to bring such trouble upon two people who had never wronged her, one of whom was her own flesh and blood. She, Iris, must do what she could to prevent the leaven working till it had leavened the whole lump of her own life and that of another ; so soon as Soames returned, the girl would go away as she had gone before, to return no more to Lady Fermor or to Lambford. King Lud would be gone, and Marianne Dugdale ought to come back for a time—it was but right for her to pay her small part of the penalty—or one of Iris's remaining cousins might take her place.

She would tell no one of her departure this time. She had said to Lady Fermor she would not, and her grandmother had forfeited every right to Iris's confidence. She would be less willing than ever to compromise the Actons together with Marianne Dugdale ; and to imply that any other person had a

right to the knowledge of what Iris was going to do, would be virtually to lend her countenance to the nebulous tie to which she was eager to put an end. She was to be a runaway twice over, but never a runaway bride. She felt she would rather die than tempt Sir William Thwaite to believe she had been willing to appropriate her share of the *rôle* which had been imposed upon them both. She would go to Mrs. Haigh, and if she could not receive her, she might find a place for Iris, safe, however humble. She would work her fingers to the bone and her eyes till they were blind in their sockets, to maintain herself in honest, honourable independence; beyond that nothing signified.

The haggard, hunted, scared look was stealing into Iris Compton's little face again, and, glancing into her mirror, she knew she looked old for her years. In addition, she felt she was old—old to indifference and hopelessness for this life, though not for the life to come, and that was her one great ground for thankfulness, which kept her heart from breaking. Iris could not realise that the youth was only beaten down, not trampled out of her, that it was possible for it to

revive and blossom like the rose, that ten years hence she might be counting herself still a young woman having a bountiful future before her, with a grateful, cheerful heart.

Iris's purpose was deferred by Soames's protracted absence. Lady Fermor did not grudge it; in fact she was at the bottom of the delay. She had caused a journey which might have been accomplished in less than twenty-four hours, to be broken by a halt of half as many days. She was lengthening the halt by keeping Soames at Lambford executing commission after commission for her mistress at Knotley, Birkett, and Cavesham, commissions sent to Soames at the rate of half-a-dozen fresh orders every morning. Iris did not believe it was Soames's fault that these could not be executed with the rapidity of a flash of lightning. The girl gave the woman credit for fretting over the length of her holiday. The all-powerful attraction of the annuity must be drawing the waiting-maid back, with all that robust strength of self-interest which has been allowed to grow without restraint for many a year. But Iris could wait—all the more easily in the end, that Sir William had gone

away on an unexplained errand which was to last a day, but detained him for a couple of days. Lady Fermor extended her afternoon drive on both days so that she might finish by taking the station on her way home and there awaiting her friend's return. Iris told herself that she wished he might not return at all during her stay at Moffat, and she thought the wish must have looked out at him from her eyes when he did appear, and Lady Fermor was calling to him—careless who might hear her, that he was a naughty man to put her to the trouble of bringing Iris twice to the station to fetch him back to the inn. For after he had driven home with them, assisted Lady Fermor to alight, and handed her over to the landlady and her subordinates, he detained Iris for a moment behind her grandmother, to say, with an undercurrent of vexation and reproach in his voice, 'I will go abroad and stay there, Miss Compton, if you wish it—you need fear no annoyance from me ; you have but to say the word ; I should be gone already, were it not that you are alone with Lady Fermor.'

That was her own motive for delay, she reflected with an undefined, unreasonable sense

of bitterness. Well, perhaps it was better they should understand each other thoroughly. But she only said—gently, as she imagined, with a chilling rejection of any privilege of standing by her, as he thought, but in truth she hardly knew what she said :

‘Don’t let any consideration with regard to grandmamma or me interfere with your arrangements, Sir William ; we shall do very well. You can see we have managed perfectly for ourselves during these two days ; besides Soames will turn up presently.’

CHAPTER XLI.

THE WRONG ROOM.

THE mail from the south had come in and Iris had left Sir William reading the newspapers to her grandmother and gone out for a solitary walk. She wanted to walk far and fast till she was wholesomely tired from bodily fatigue, to be braced by the strong north country air, and to have the moorland wind blow away the cobwebs which had lodged in her brain, were stifling her common-sense, and torturing her nerves. She had climbed the hill Marianne had spoken of—one of those hills which, so far as general resemblance and a name in common go, are appendages to various towns in Scotland, being memorials of the last gruesome scene of all which followed the exercise of the jurisdiction of a baron's court.

The hill was fair to see in its autumn

garniture, and retained no brand of gallows and hangings. It was the object of one of the favourite walks of the place. Marianne had climbed it, but with King Lud in place of Iris for her companion, in a spirit of faithlessness which other maidens have shown before her, and will show to the end of time. Indeed, according to the law of natural selection, such hills are an approved resort for persons in the particular relation which seemed to flourish abundantly, at least in Iris's distempered eyes, at the little watering place.

Perhaps the old naval hero and his runaway bride had climbed the tolerably steep ascent with nimble feet in their day. If so his glorious deeds and the fame which has survived and blotted out his shame might have formed a fitting topic for the other captain bold—save for King Lud's inveterate modesty—to enlarge upon to his mistress, just as the sea king's escapade on shore, with its grievous consequences, haunted Iris with threats and forebodings. Had that old-world couple, with a certain vigorous stamp lingering about their very shadowiness, played their own game in perfect earnest; or had

they, too, been somehow decoyed and forced among quicksands ?

Iris did not anticipate much seclusion in her walk, for the hill was not only frequented by visitors in the season, it was haunted from late spring to late autumn, as she could guess, by children seeking in succession birds' nests, blaeberrries, and blackberries ; still she could find a quiet spot where she might sit down and rest and look at the wide, free view of hill and hollow and river, just broken here and there by patches of yellow corn-land, stretches of green pasture grass, bits of wood. She could realise that she was in a pastoral country where, whatever human discord broke the stillness, there was always a harmonious undertone made up of the bleating of sheep and the humming of bees among the heather, the occasional bark of a shepherd's dog, the constant trickle far and near of innumerable threads of water which rose and were fed among the hills, to feed in turn the bigger burns and the rivers rushing on to the sea. Overhead was the solemn grey sky of the north country, in which, though there was no sign of rain, the blue was not left long unin-vaded, and the white of the fleecy clouds

was brushed with a silvery grey, passing here and there to deeper, darker, though still clear tints of slate colour.

Iris would fain have let the simplicity and peace of the landscape sink into her harassed mind from which a fantastic nightmare could not be driven out. But she was not left alone to reason with herself, reassure and calm herself by recovering mental balance and spiritual faith, for almost the first thing she saw was Sir William's glengarry rising above the bracken as he pushed his way regardless of the obstacles on a wrong track, to reach her. She was not safe even on the hill of ancient hangings; she was pursued, and caught at that distance from the inn. In despair, she sat quite still and let him come up and speak to her.

'I beg your pardon for intruding upon you, Miss Compton,' he said humbly enough, panting a little from his reckless exertions to gain her side. 'But I have something to say which I am taking the first opportunity to tell you by yourself. It is what you ought to know at once; I have no doubt you will be glad to hear it.'

Iris turned upon him a questioning, appre-

hensive, half-indignant glance. Then she bethought herself that he was not knowingly to blame for all the misery he had caused, that he was himself involved in the last misfortune. A rush of remorse amounting to tender friendliness came over her for the manner in which she was beginning to treat him, so that she spoke to him quite kindly.

‘In place of requiring you to apologise for interrupting my important meditations,’ she said, with rather a forlorn attempt at gaiety, ‘I ought to thank you heartily, Sir William, for taking so much trouble about something in which you think I have an interest,’ and she made room for him to sit down by her.

He threw himself down where she indicated, and was silent for a moment, plucking the heather and looking, not at her, but straight before him with a far-away expression in his eyes. Perhaps he felt what he had already experienced more than once during this year, he was realising the literal circumstances of a bygone dream, in which, however, all the premises had undergone a variation. Not least of all, though that was not in his count, his personal appearance and

general air were changed since Iris had first known him. His manliness was more matured, much that had sat constrainedly and uneasily on him he now carried lightly and unthinkingly. He had the look of a plain, brusque, but not undignified country gentleman of the class into which his first sanguine backers had argued he would merge. The chestnut beard which he wore covered the somewhat dogged squareness of the jaw and the weakness of the chin, while the lines from the nose to the corners of the mouth were so defined as to give the leonine cast to the face. The fulness of forehead beneath the waves of hair had already a furrow or two, and the slight contraction of the brow seemed to set the blue eyes more deeply, and to cast a shadow over them. The face was still massive, tending to ruggedness as it grew older, with more of thoughtfulness and of calm repression and patient pain at the present moment than of its old stern tension or passionate impulse.

To Iris's surprise, Sir William drew out his pocket-book and unfolded a written paper.

‘ I must first tell you where I have been,

Miss Compton,' he said, and his colour deepened like a girl's while he spoke. 'I've been back to ——,' and he mentioned the inn at which the party had made their last momentous halt.

She would have said :

'What took you there ?' but her lips would not utter the words.

He went on hurriedly :

'I wished to see the landlord, who, so far from seeming a regular blackguard, appeared a respectable enough man. My object was to seek an explanation from him—if an explanation were needed—to ascertain what he had to say of the farce which Lady Fermor insists on keeping up.'

'I dare say you were right,' Iris forced herself to say, half inaudibly, with her eyes turned away, and falling by chance on the little bare hand without the bridegroom's gift of a ring lying languidly on her gown.

'I did not see him at first. By a curious coincidence Lady Fermor had written for him to come here ; but he had to attend some sale. I waited for his return and had a conversation with him. He told me the whole truth, and I made him write it down, and

have it witnessed. I took a copy for Lady Fermor, and gave it to her within the last half-hour. This is for you ; all you have to do is to keep it, and it will save you from further anxiety and vexation.'

Iris took the sheet of ruled blue paper in bewilderment. The writing was the round clerkly hand of the best old Scotch parish schools. The diction was not so unexceptionable ; but though the intelligence it conveyed threw a new light on everything, the style ought not to have been incomprehensible, if it had not been for the circumstance that the letters and the sense of the words danced before Iris's eyes and understanding. She could not take them in for some moments. It was only by a supreme effort at self-control that she at last mastered the contents of the paper.

'This is to certify that my house of entertainment at ——, being built on the very boundary-line between the two countries—as there are plenty of records to prove what the "Marches" are—some of its rooms are in England and some in Scotland. The sitting-rooms which were lately occupied by Lady Fermor

and party are both in England. No marriage ceremony performed according to Scotch law within the bounds of either of them would be legal, or could stand. This would be the case even though the contract had been entered into in good faith, with the full knowledge and concurrence of all concerned—whereas I am assured by Sir William Thwaite, who acted as the bridegroom in a performance of which I got a glimpse, that the whole thing was a mere play or frolic, never intended by the principal persons engaged in it to go any farther.

‘I wish to say for myself that I believe the fact of part of the house being in England and part in Scotland did not exist without abuse lang syne. Sometimes, to extort rewards and bribes, the couples who had whiles betrayed others were themselves betrayed, and were handed over unwed, when they had thought otherwise, to the friends at their heels. Or, what was baser still, bride and bridegroom had to cower their whole life lang before the auld innkeepers and the mock ministers, and pay sweetly for their silence on what, in point of law, was no better than a mock marriage. Or, if the bridegroom were

a villain, he could cast off his bride through the villainy of his helpers.

‘ I had no suspicion of what was going on the other night till I was warned by one of the servant lasses, who mistook jest for earnest. I came up, as fast as my feet would carry me, to shift the party into the opposite room, which had first to be cleared of its company. By the time that had been done the business was all but finished, while it looked to me more like a foolish joke than a serious weddin’. In that case, with no harm intended or done, I appeal to any innkeeper in his senses if it was for me to come forward and affront and displease titled customers. If I had got any proof that the marriage was really meant for a wedding which was to be carried out, I hereby solemnly declare that I would have come forward and telled the truth at any cost.

‘ I admit when the old leddy started at break-of-day, leaving the couple behind, I misdoubted the joke and tried to get speech of her, but she would not hear me. Maybe she has minded that though, and so has sent for me to go all the way to Moffat to speak with her. And when the gentleman that

stood for the bridegroom, who has now come back to clear up the story, left next, that same morning, I thought like the lave that he would be back again in no time, and that it would be soon enough then to warn him. It was rather a ticklish thing, if so be he thought he was wad, to tell him he was mistaken, and bear the wyte of the English rooms which belonged to the building of the house on the very Border a good wheen years before I was born.

‘ I meant also to speak to the young leddy, though she had sustained no wrong that I know of, but before I had word of her intended departure she too had gone off with a friend that was sent back for her just at the moment when I was engaged with some pressing customers ; and I could not think she would suffer harm in her friend’s hands. However, the affair has been on my mind, and I have not been without fear that, jest or earnest, me, and more than me, might get into trouble about it yet. And I was on the eve of travelling as far as Moffat at my own ill-convenience to obey the auld leddy’s orders and make a clean breast of it to her, when the gentleman calling himself Sir William

Thwaite, who is, according to his own account, biding at the same inn in Moffat, came express to me, and saved me the journey. He has caused me to write this paper, which he is to show the leddies. He'll certify that I have been ready to answer all his questions and to communicate to him the local disqualification, which attests beyond dispute that no legal marriage was, or could have been, celebrated in the front or in the back-parlour on the second floor of my house of —— on the evening of the 7th of August, 187—.

‘(Signed) ANDREW PEEBLES.

‘(Witnessed) JAMES MUSGRAVE.

‘CATHARINE PRESTON.’

Iris was free ; no further glamour could be thrown over an idle incident—an accident, and the finger of scandal would never point to her, even in her grave. But the result was something altogether different from what she had been brought to dread, and the man who had freed her, who thus voluntarily renounced the far-fetched ghost of a claim to her, was the same who in the hay-field at Whitehills had persisted against every remonstrance in

declaring his desperate love for her, and maintained it was no light fancy, but a life-long passion and sorrow. This was the man who dissolved the masquerade that yet seemed to bind them strangely together. But while it somehow smote her to the heart that he could do it, she cried out against herself for her disloyalty to herself and him, and told herself the truth, that if he had acted otherwise he must have degraded himself in her eyes, and she would have had the double anguish of learning to despise him at this date. She must not let him see what she thought; she must give him his due. She turned to him with her hands clasped tightly, and brilliant roses in the cheeks that were growing thin.

‘How shall I ever thank you, Sir William? If you had failed me and made me suffer for a piece of folly, what would have become of me, and of you also? But you behaved like the perfect gentleman and true friend that I have long known you to be.’

‘Come,’ he said, catching his breath and speaking with something of the old roughness, ‘don’t make it too hard for a fellow. But I must speak out just this once, since

we shall never allude to the subject again.'

'You might have paid me back for what must have struck you as a girl's intolerable arrogance,' she said, half under her breath.

'No, no,' he corrected her quickly; 'you are talking nonsense now. You could never be arrogant. It was I who was a presumptuous, deluded idiot.'

'You have shielded and delivered me,' she said sadly, 'while I—I believe I have done nothing save injure you since the first time we met.'

'How can you say so?' he cried, impatiently—almost indignantly. 'You made a man of me—by causing me to look up to what was far above my reach certainly—but when I fell back into the beast again have you forgotten how you came and saved both me and poor Honor?'

'Poor Honor!' echoed Iris, and the tears began to trickle down her cheeks in spite of herself, for she had been much tried lately, and the strain on her was, as she had said, becoming more than she could bear.

'Don't cry, Miss Compton, for mercy's sake,' he implored. 'I could not stand it. I

could not answer for myself, though at my worst I would not have taken advantage of you in the way you seem to think I might have done. To make out, after one mad moment, that you had married me truly according to the Scotch law, or any law, and to call Lady Fermor to bear me out in the assertion, would have been to act like a rascal as well as a brute, to have lost your friendship, and I have been proud to possess that at least.'

'And now we shall be friends always,' she said wistfully.

'I don't know,' he answered restlessly. 'Yes, friends in heart I hope, if you will do me the honour. But it ain't as if I were another woman or a better man. I think I shall go abroad as I proposed.'

'All the same you will come back to Whitehills one day,' she ventured with a faint smile.

'What, to find you——' he began vehemently, then stopped for an instant, and went on more quietly. 'If I cared for you as you deserve to be cared for, I should not regret finding you in a happier and safer home than where I first saw you, and shall always re-

member you, at Lambford. But I am a selfish dog.'

She was silent now, breathing with soft quickness.

'I need not say Lady Fermor, though she has tried to be my friend,' he remarked with rather a grim smile, 'is no protector for you, any more than she was for your cousin, Miss Dugdale. But you are another sort of girl—so much wiser and stronger in your gentleness, that it was only after repeated proofs I could think your grandmother might be too much for you. It is exactly as I said the other night at the station ; forgive me for the liberty, but I cannot, as I am a man, endure to leave you with her.'

She continued dumb. She did not say, as she had implied before, that whatever risk she ran it could be nothing to him, or that she resented pity from him ; she did not upbraid him with hurting her by reminding her of her friendlessness ; she did not bid him go again.

He looked at her with the keenest, most earnest scrutiny, flushing high while he looked.

'I am sure you would not trifle with me, Miss Compton. You did not do it before,

when I was a foolhardy ass. Perhaps you think it is impossible one man can twice err in the same indefensible way. You know I was such a blockhead as not to see through your cousin's merry fencing, and guess on which side her deliverance lay. I was tempted to feel that, if she would let me, I ought to come to the rescue, and not see her sacrificed as I had seen another bright, kind woman perish. It seemed all that was left for me to do. It was not giving up much, for I had not a grain of hope besides. But I could not venture to approach you, and propose to be your protector, not even after what has come and gone—you are too far above me.'

She made a hasty deprecating movement to interrupt him, but he did not heed it.

'And it would be too great a mockery—I may as well say it, since I am in for it, though I may affront you again. You have said enough to show you will not mistake me—I love you as I love my life. I have done so from the first moment I saw you; I shall do it to my last gasp, though you mayn't like it. I can't help it any more than you can. And I might have been content with your toler-

ance—like a scrap thrown to a dog—in the past ; but though I've been down in the depths since then, things are different somehow with me. I could not be satisfied to-day with what I should perhaps have caught at years ago. I am wiser, or I am prouder, though I have little enough to be proud of. I should not ask much, but I must have a grain—a living seed fit to sprout and grow. I know only too well what I have been, and how unworthy I am still ; but if you could ever look over it, like the generous, gentle soul you are and were to poor Honor—I don't mind though it were a bit for her sake—you had a soft heart to her, bless you ! because she has left me alone in the world—why then I should be the proudest, gladdest fellow on earth. I would keep you, as far as my life could save you, from care and sorrow. I would serve you with my best, and ask only a crumb of kindness, and that you yourself should be happy.

She spoke at last. ' Not for Honor's sake,' she faltered, ' though I did care for her, but for your own—not a crumb, but all. Has it not been well won ?' She laid her hand in his as she spoke, and her pure lips

were there for his reverent awed lips to press, her sweet eyes to return shyly his blissful glances.

After the two had talked long together, Sir William suddenly announced, with a laugh which spoke volumes for the terms to which they had attained: 'I have forgotten to tell you that Lady Fermor was so put out by the paper I brought her, she said she would set off for Lambford to-morrow; she would not wait for Soames.'

'Well, if grandmamma does it won't matter—will it? She did not forbid you to accompany her, I hope. I shall be very glad to see home again, to see them all at the Rectory, and hear what they will say. Perhaps we may be in time to catch up King Lud, before he sails. Poor, dear Marianne! I am sorry for her now.'

'Why in the world should you be sorry?'

'Because you are not going to sail, Sir William—ought I to tell you that?'

'If it does not hurt you to say it, it is very agreeable for me to hear it.'

'But it will spoil you, and as it was only the other day that I refused to entertain you, I think you may have some notion how far I

was from contemplating spoiling you then. We must not get on quite so fast. But I will say this, that I doubt if King Lud and Marianne are quite so happy as we are.'

'I doubt it too, though I have only one reason to give for the doubt.'

'I don't wish to hear that reason again to-day; I think I have heard it already. I mean because they have not been tried.'

'Perhaps he would not agree with you, poor chap.'

'Oh! but that was all a man's stupidity not to see through her flattering opposition. They have come together without one real tribulation to test them. They strike me at this moment as two quite inexperienced, light-hearted young persons, so that one fears—though one hopes not—that the cares and trials may all lie before them. Now we, though doubtless we have troubles by the score in store for us, have passed through fire and water; we know and can trust ourselves and each other.'

There was trouble in his eyes at that very minute. 'Trusted and tried, and never found wanting—I can say that of you, my sweetheart; but can you ever trust me?'

‘Yes, William,’ she said with simple sincerity, and so earnestly that there was a little solemnity in her tones ; ‘with all my heart. You have fought a good fight, and He who strengthened you for the battle will never suffer you to be vanquished. I shall be glad to be home again,’ she added more lightly. ‘I have been very unhappy there sometimes, but I feel as if that were all to be forgotten now, and only the peaceful, happy days to be remembered. I was never so long away from home before. Now that I have time to think of it, I want very much to see what changes have taken place in my corner of Eastham during my absence.’

‘And you want to see Whitehills again, for Lambford cannot long be your home ; you will begin to look on Whitehills very differently. We may go abroad and see the world, but we must settle at Whitehills ; that will always be the most important place to us.’

‘You cannot tell how long ago I was told to give my most serious consideration to Whitehills. Your cousin, Lady Thwaite, will think I have taken her advice,’

‘Never mind what she thinks. I suppose she will be pleased, and she will forgive me.’

Well, she has forgiven me long ago. But I shall take to her now, for I cannot forget that it was by her means I saw my lady first.'

'It was after that meeting I called you "a good sort of young man" to grandmamma.'

'I am afraid I did not deserve the character. But, Iris, Lady Thwaite is the only pretence to a friend I can give you.'

'And how many can I give you?' she said with an answering sigh.

'I think if you had known my sister Jen you would have loved her, though she had to work to earn bread for her and me, and was a washerwoman to the last day that I left her in peace.'

'I am sure I should,' said Iris, with conviction. 'Nobody, not you yourself, could have been so much obliged to her, and we should have had one chief source of interest in common.'

'There is a good fellow who has been, next to you, since I lost Jen, the best friend I had in the world, though he would never call himself anything save my servant. He will be as proud as a peacock, as pleased as a pike-staff to hear the great news.'

'I know,' said Iris, with a bright smile;

‘Bill Rogers. Tell him from me to wish us both joy. His sister has sometimes said that if I had ever a house of my own she would like to go with me. She may if grandmamma consents, mayn’t she? Why, we have loads of faithful friends, William.’

When the couple returned to the inn, they had tarried so long that Lady Fermor, in great dudgeon from another cause, had eaten her luncheon without them, and set out on her afternoon drive alone.

Sir William and Iris strolled into the inn-garden. She found an old-fashioned rosebush still covered with roses, the same as some she had seen at the last halting-place. A few hours ago she would have tried not to see those roses; she would not have spoken of them—least of all to Sir William Thwaite; she would have wished to forget that they were there. But a single morning had brought such a change to the depressing, distracting conditions of her life, that she hailed the flowers. She caused him to gather clusters of them, shared them with him, put some of them as before in her jacket. ‘Do you remember ever seeing such roses?’ she asked him mischievously.

‘You are out if you expect to find my memory in fault here,’ he told her. ‘It ain’t the best of memories, but there are some things I don’t forget. I could show you the marrow of these in my pocket-book.’

‘Then keep them carefully, for they were my single ornament at the rehearsal of the greatest event in our lives.’

The girl was laughing and jesting already, girl-like, at the nightmare of the last two or three weeks. And he was a proud and happy man to note the change in her—proud and happy to have her speaking to him in this fashion.

The whole party dined that day for the first time, by Lady Fermor’s choice, at the *table d’hôte* of the inn. There were some inquisitive people present who had seen the titles of two of the party in the visitors’ book, and were attracted by the aristocratic old mummy who asserted her importance, and the handsome young couple under her charge. The girl had a head like a cherub, and her companion looked a comely young fellow in the heyday of his life. Clusters of the same rose were in her fichu and in his buttonhole; and the eyes of the wearers had a trick of

straying to each other, even in an august presence. It was remarked if my Lady Fermor did not approve of that match, she had brought the pair into a dangerous neighbourhood.

The truth was that at the close of Iris's grandmother's afternoon nap, she had heard of the accomplishment of the marriage, for which she had so long planned, schemed, and striven by fair means and foul, of which that very morning she had received cause to despair. She had got her will; but the question was how far it had lost its charm and become embittered to her by the circumstance that her instrumentality had little or nothing to do with the attainment of her end. She had even been foiled in her last daring, heartless, shameless move; and it was only by their own choice, which they might have exerted any day, that Sir William and Iris were about to marry. Lady Fermor had heard Sir William with little snorts and something not far from a scowl. She had said: 'You have plenty of cheek, Thwaite, to come to me with such a proposal, after the paper you showed me this morning. You two have taken your own time and mode to make up

your minds, and have been rather long about it. What if I decide to have my objections now ; to say I am sick—which is a fact—of the tiresome affair, and to forbid the alliance to go any further ?

‘I am afraid that it is too late, Lady Fermor, after the encouragement you have given me,’ said Sir William, keeping his temper. ‘I don’t ask anything more from you except your grand-daughter, while I am ready to make any settlement upon her that you please. Excuse me, my lady, but you have not exhibited so deep an interest in her welfare or dealt so fairly by her, as to warrant her—a woman who is of age—in declining to act for herself because you bid her.’

‘And I have shown you no kindness—have looked over no slips and stumbles on your part ? Of course not. Deny that you owe me anything. That is the way of the world.’

But though Lady Fermor had been astoundingly ungracious and unreasonable in eyes which might have read her better by this time, she was a woman of the world. She did not dismiss Sir William ; she accepted, however grumblingly, his escort back to England ; and she proceeded to announce

the marriage as if it had been from beginning to end of her making.

Before Iris was far across the Border she sent back a letter to Jeannie, the maid at the inn.

‘I have taken your advice, Jeannie—not because a happy accident has enabled your master, with James Musgrove and Catharine Preston, whoever they may be, to testify to my deliverance from an unknown danger, not because I fear any scandal in the future, but because I now know certainly what I just guessed before, that Sir William Thwaite is one of the best of men, and that I shall be one of the happiest of women if I marry him in sober earnest. You must not think that I am out of my senses to write this after what I said to you. To convince you of it I will grant that he is not perfect, any more than his fellow-mortals—that he has had his evil days ; but he has been made the conqueror, and I am going to share his conquest. I owe it to your kindness to let you know the happy end of the story ; and remember, Jeannie, if I can ever serve you in return, count upon me. I enclose Sir William’s address for this purpose.’

Lady Thwaite was profuse and tolerably sincere in her congratulations. 'I am glad you have thought better of it, my love. You are a lucky girl; not everybody gets the opportunity of changing her mind to some purpose. I shall be charmed to have you reigning in my place in dear old Whitehills. We will shut our eyes and forget that there was an infatuated, miserable interregnum, with another dreadful Lady Thwaite, between. He will only think the more of you, if he should ever look back and contrast the two. I speak as a relation of the family, my dear Iris.'

'But you are mistaken, Lady Thwaite,' said Iris, with the old involuntary drawing up of her figure and rearing of her little head; 'neither Sir William nor I will ever forget poor Honor. There can be no invidious comparison or contrast between us two. We were brought up very differently, yet we were friends, in spite of every obstacle, when we were children and girls. Do you know the last thing she did before she left Whitehills was to come across to Lambford to bid me farewell? I am glad to think of it.'

'Oh! Well, just as you like, my dear.

You and Sir William are two very remarkable people—about the most remarkable in my circle ; and if it please you to recollect what most persons would prefer to forget, it is only a matter of taste ; it does not necessarily signify.’

Marianne Dugdale first stared, then said, a little drily : ‘ I was led to suppose the *penchant* was all on one side ; that is, after I had got the faintest hint of a *penchant*. In short, there have been so many different accounts that, upon my word, one is puzzled which to believe.’ Then she added, while she struggled between a frown and a smile, ‘ So you two will be married long before we shall.’ But presently the smile gained the supremacy and grew wondrous sweet, and Marianne cried, ‘ All right !’ and kissed Iris with effusion before the whole company, looking as much affronted the next moment as if King Lud had been the object of the caress.

His congratulations were frank and hearty, the Rector and his wife and all the others were complaisant, but Lucy held back a little.

Lucy had been much exercised lately on

the subject of her brother's engagement. She had been affectionately impressed by the prize Marianne Dugdale had won. King Lud's virtue from childhood, his unblemished character in every respect, had been the frequent theme of Lucy's laudations. She had dwelt with justice on these lustrous jewels in King Lud's crown, until she felt truly that for any man to be without them, or to have tarnished their lustre, was a flaw indeed. Thus the very girl who had given in her early adherence to Iris's accepting the fate assigned to her, and complying with her grandmother's wishes, now sought anxiously to hold the willing bride back, and to remonstrate with her on concluding the contract. It was another and a much more commendable spirit than that exhibited by the Hollises, who, when they heard of the marriage, protested it was a thousand pities it had not happened an age ago, when there was a much greater and more amusing disparity between the pair, and when poor Sir William was always shivering on the verge of putting out the cloven foot; as it was, the second Lady Thwaite, though she was a nice enough girl, and all that sort of thing, would never be

the gain to the jolliness of the neighbourhood which the first had promised to be.

‘Yes, darling,’ said Lucy, hesitating a good deal, ‘it is delightful to have you settled so near us after all. It is very pleasant to think that you can bring yourself to do what Lady Fermor has so long wished. She is your grandmother, your nearest surviving relative, and she has brought you up besides. I am sure you know I am the very last person to speak lightly of such obligations. But oh! Iris, may they not sometimes be set aside? So many things have happened since we talked of this before. You will not be angry with me for alluding to Sir William’s origin, which is the same as it ever was, of course, but then we had not the enlightenment of his low marriage and of his terrible unsteadiness for a time. I would not vex you for the world, Iris, but we are such old friends! Is it not too great a risk? Are you not frightened?’

‘No,’ said Iris, without anger, though with a heightened colour; ‘and I am glad that you have spoken out this once to me, Lucy, for I know you mean it kindly, and I can tell you everything. Love casts out fear,

and I love him ! I have long loved him. Would you turn from the creature you loved, because he had been subject to some deadly disease, which, in spite of all his brave desperate struggles to throw it off and regain perfect health, it was just possible might return and prostrate him again ? Would you not rather cling to him and help him to meet the enemy ? You know there can be no defeat in the end, because the very soul of evil was vanquished long centuries ago ; and I have no thought that there will be a partial defeat. Oh, Lucy, think what his trials and disadvantages have been and how he has risen above them, and then measure him, if you dare—if you have the heart—with those who were never really called upon to bear the burden and heat of the day, never thrown and trampled in the mire—down in the place of dragons—or faint with the deadly weakness of ignorance, evil habits, and undisciplined passions. I can understand it all, because I have been brought up in a tainted atmosphere, so close to the blot on my kindred that only one thing could have kept me clean. What, am I to sit in judgment on William Thwaite, who has burst

his bonds and trodden them under foot? Do you think I would not rather run a thousand risks than that they should entangle his very feet again? He is free as any man, but bound or free, love can but live and die for its object.'

And he was made a conqueror. Is it so strange a thing to believe that a man who has been once caught in the toils, may yet again go free, with God's own heaven above him, a loving, faithful woman by his side, and little children clasping his knees?

Iris's screen, with the working out of the great artist's idea of the contest between Arachnë and Minerva, found a place in the Whitehills drawing-room among some relics of poor Honor's finery, tenderly dealt with for her sake. Sir William had an immense admiration for his wife's screen, which the embroideress tried in vain to lower to a reasonable moderation. Rumour darkly whispered the master of Whitehills preferred that comparatively stilted piece of embroidery — begging the great artist's pardon—not only to all the old tapestry, but to one of the glories of the house, the semblance of his ancestress with the toy rake,

designed and executed by the king of English portrait-painters. Iris was a little afraid that Sir William venerated her *Arachnë* and *Minerva* as one of the art wonders of the world, and that there was no help for it. But a man's extravagant appreciation of his wife's handiwork, even though it may interfere with his æsthetic taste, is surely a fault which leans to virtue's side.

Mrs. Haigh and Ju-ju came and saw the screen in its place of honour, and the former on her return to her boarders exalted Lady Thwaite still more than she had exalted 'the Honourable Miss Compton.'

Marianne Dugdale was a great deal with her cousins, even after she had changed her name, during those first partings from her husband, before she had a settled home with its nursery, when the least gust of wind at night among the old trees in the park sent her down to breakfast next morning with her temper in a particularly rasping condition. Then she would rail at the Admiralty for parting husbands and wives, and not letting her sail with King Lud, when she would have been no trouble; on the contrary, she would have lent efficient aid in setting every

bolt and spar of her Majesty's ship to rights.

Whitehills was a great rendezvous of the Actons, from the Rector with his flowery but honest compliments to the youngest of his offspring. Indeed, the place became established in the records of the neighbourhood as a most pleasant and hospitable country house, in which the dowager Lady Thwaite was fain to claim a vested interest.

Lady Fermor having established her granddaughter very creditably, behaved as if she had done enough, and concerned herself very little with young Lady Thwaite and her doings. The old woman did not grow fonder of the young one, even after Lady Fermor's infirmities increased until she was forced to admit some of Iris's gentle good offices. But to the last Lady Fermor much preferred the attentions of Sir William, to whom she had long ago been entirely reconciled, and any softening of her stout-hearted looks and cynical words were always for him.

So completely were Iris's bugbears dispersed by the genial influence of a good husband and a happy home, that in walking down the main street of Knotley one day,

and meeting the wreck of a broken-down old man dragging himself along by the help of a servant's arm and a stick, she crossed over, stopped and inquired kindly for him, listening with commiserating interest to his mumbled complaints.

Her first words when she next saw her husband were :

‘I met poor grandmamma’s friend whom she used to call “old Pollock,” in Knotley to-day, the first time for many months. I don’t think he was ever very likeable, but how silly I must have been to feel such a horror of him, and now he looks so wretched, feeble, and friendless, poor man ! William, is there nothing we can do for him ?’

THE END.





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